



gormglaith

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a tale by
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under elms

"Guess."

Findabair Pane cast a lopsided grin and leaned her willowy frame against an elm trunk in the green henge shade as a million leaves wept to the sly gab of yodeling magpies.

Popinjay eyes brimmed as freckles stormed under her shock of maple red hair. A dark pine cotton cutty sark fluttered open at the waist of black linen longstockings pulled high over ribs clutching like clarsachs. Kicking rough bark with the big bighty heels of clunky black wooden klompen, Findabair gazed at another tall, bony girl clad alike in ash and grey, her cheeks a watchet glow behind chin length straw blond thatch.

"Thou made'st a bee streak for the Farlings'."

Wind blew hair across their faces. Neither shoved it back.

"Thou wast the fit little helper all after, stitchin' brownies with Fethnaid 'n Faith for Harvest home since they take four nights to brew and thou smellst like one."

"Thorpe cabbage!" Findabair threw back with a wraithen smile.

"Tell me when I swoon."

"Hold on a tick, ok? How's Devon?"

A blond eyebrow hovered. From side pocket came a prism, a sheer, sparkling gore splaying a wan rainbow on Gormglaith's hand. Findabair leaned in for a closer look.

"...Dinky!"

Findabair raised her chin, tongue flicking blithely. Mouths latched as they pulled close in fad and fumble beneath flapping cutty sarks. A wide grin peeked from behind windblown straw thatch.

"Dost thou think my hues are true, Gormglaith?"

"Rather."

Findabair drew a breath.

"Ever since Gweneth ran off to Blairie, I've been thinking. I mean we both know swans like us *should* be scootin' onto the lake of life. We need to put our heads together, plight, bone up and get a cool flat in Kin Dails... like maybe something on Coo rood, off Yew lane near all the lekker lass haunts..."

Thatch tilted.

"Thou didstn't."

Findabair made a dimpled grin.

"Fuck! Thou didst! Ok, let me guess. Fethnaid told thee, 'Th'art clueless. Now, let's show thee how we skive the cane.'"

"Gasping, Gormglaith..."

"Thou ranst the same dodgy scam on me last week when we made chocolate blizzard shortbread!"

"Aye 'n it spun di'nit."

"Not! Anyway I guess there's no need to keep on about it."

"Uhm, maybe there is."

"...What am I missing here?"

"What's left of the tale. I mean, I know I'm no Gillian Goblyn or anything, so I thought they didn't give a luzz, handed Faith the cane jar and dropped the gab like a hot potato. Then later, as I was leaving, Fethnaid let slip we all might be rather keen about getting the nod from our kynn to even talk about it, this being such a stern little thorpe and the twins being so *too* themselves... stern, that is. I was gobsmacked, but like they say," Findabair put with a nod, "sometimes, all tha hast to do is ask."

Gormglaith gaped with a chary stare.

"...Findabair Pane if thou thinkst I'm going to get stark with the Farling twins and thee under the elms of Elmhenge in front of kynn 'n kin and a gooey clutch to plight *my* life away in the most wanton setup..."

"I knew thou'dst see the dreamy side, Gormglaith."

Findabair shrugged in her fazy way. Gormglaith gazed at freckled face and loopy smile as the magpies gossiped high in soaring wych elms rushing on the wind.

"Ok, I'll think about it."

"Thou wilt?" asked Findabair, so startled she stumbled.

"I'll think about it..." echoed Gormglaith, big black wooden klompen rooted flat on the ground.

"...Maybe."

"Seal it with a kiss."

"No."

"Huh?!"

"Steal it with a kiss, thou meanst! No way!"

"No pog," said Findabair, nodding steadfastly, arms loose at her sides.

Gormglaith answered with searing eyes.

"Twixies!"

Findabair's hair flew as her head popped up with shining popinjay eyes and a wraithen smile.

"Twixies!"

Gormglaith looked off as Findabair put dry hands on a waist sharply bladed by hip bones floating over buoyant thews in grey linen. Her eyes flit open when Gormglaith pogged back and tongues twined, pelvises rubbing to a keen beat whilst beyond the elms flaxen fields surged against misty hills and a waxing moon rose amid white puffy clouds hurrying across a sky deepening to starry cobalt.

Gormglaith made an odd face and dashed off on the elm boughed path, open cutty sark flying by the breeze. At about fifty yards she stopped hard, spun about and with hand over head, waved at Findabair who waved back and shouted,

"Midnight! Lea Cairn!"

Gormglaith nodded, twirled and ran as Findabair wandered along the grass path, whistling with magpies in a cool gathering dusk.

A dozen furlongs later Gormglaith came to an airy house of weathered chalk limestone near a bend in the sled lane amid uncut, windswept mead grass and leafy elms. She strode through the doors of Bryn larach, tousled the white haired head of her naked and casperish little sister Gobnait who was in busy gab with a hovering goblin toonishly cast like a big, yellow and black striped honeybee, then yelled,

"I'm home!"

"Hi Gormglaith!" came a chirpy greeting from the kitchen.

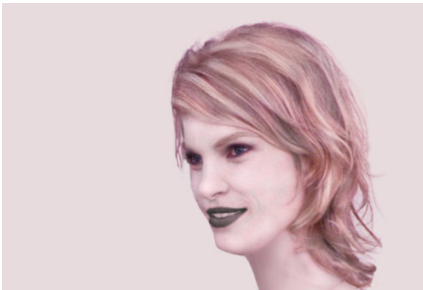
"Hi Giorsal. Where's Geileis?"

"They're here somewhere... I think!"

"They?"

"Here I am!"

By a narrow doorway Geileis Grendel Hafgan Halsen stood swathed in dark shadows, pumpkin-red sunset flooding behind her. Six feet tall with a lanky frame bearing wrinkled grey longstockings pulled up to her bare flat chest and wearing big yellow Frisian wooden klompen Geileis seemed about twenty, after which one looks elsewhere for clues. She greeted Gormglaith with canny blue lake eyes, shoving back a tangled thatch of neck length straw hair and smiling chalkenly as kynn are wont to do when a clannin daughter comes home for supper.



Geileis | smiling chalkenly

"Look," said Gormglaith, holding the gore out straight armed.
"Devon gave it to me."

Geileis grinned at her twin daughter.

"That's neat!"

"Ripping, Gormglaith!" answered someone else.

"Shenn Grainne Grendel!"

"Gormglaith Grendel Hafgan Halsen!" said a shorter girl with long yellow hair and sunken eyes, hands on hips in black longstockings, platinum edged klompen to match (and among the few hints she was nudging a hundred and ninety).



Grainne | among the few hints

They hugged and kissed and spun.

As the sun's last beams blew rafters of ruddy pumpkin light through wefted windows the three of them stood and played with the gore, splitting a wide band of true red onto the chalky stone wall. Seeing a bright rainbow of light streaking from her sister's hand Gobnait forgot the bee and ran over to wrap an arm each about Geileis and Gormglaith's thighs.

"*That* is a *Nichneven*..." said the moppet, tugging at their legs whilst shrewdly following it with a deft stereo stare.

They scrunched and kneeled on an embroidered rug to split more light but Gobnait soon wandered off with a weary sigh. Gormglaith went cross legged, Geileis and Grainne with knees drawn to chins, glittering gore at their klompended feet.

"We were having sunflower butter and strawberry jam butties," said Gormglaith, "reading *Lundin sundering* and she set it on the board. She says it's for Harvest home, since I got another *Tales of the knotty kindel* book for my birthday and Yule is moons off. She's had it for over 225 years and says it was old when she got it."

"Yule or Harvest home," Geileis sighed, "it's the canny token."

"I saw Findabair..." said Gormglaith, leveling a smile.

"...She wants to plight."

Twin daughter and kynn held likened looks as Grainne cast Geileis a sharpening glance.

"...Oh!" said Geileis, shaking her head. "What'dst thou say? Who's the lucky third?"

Gormglaith leaned back and grinned.

"I told her I'd think about it."

"Gurfling..." came a silvery tongue as the front doors opened.

"...to a dodgy end." said a lower one.

Gormglaith sprang up like a spindly apple snatcher robot.

Enid Hafgan Halsen was of shorter than middling height, a faaish grass witch with sly hazel eyes and sandy hair falling lankily in two thin braids, long bangs sweeping forward over hidden cheeks and a hint of overbite which by most tellings some girls found weird and fetching. At her side was Aine of Knockaine, pillywiginish and lithe yet hardy with a pushed up, squish nose and blue black, pumpkin streaked hair in big thick braids hanging to her waist. They were both in the abiding grey longstockings, handy cutty sarks and thrash wooden klompen worn so wontedly by thralls in the West meads.

"Looky!"

"Gasping, Gormglaith," said Enid, nudging her bangs. "Cracking gore... ash ice, looks like a Nichneven... this thing'll split starlight. Where'dst tha get it?"

"Devon Rand."

"...Lapped two thousand years ago, at least," Enid said as Geileis entwined her like a gangly cat, "and looky here... oy!"

Geileis had slapped her bottom, pulling away with a tight grin.

"Hi Grainne," said Enid, handing the gore back to Gormglaith and casting an unflappable gaze, bangs slipping over her long face.

"Hi Aine!" blurted Geileis, grinning wide, "...how's Ailis?"

"Hey Geileis. Oh, she's fettle... fatter."

Everyone laughed.

"Tell her I'll come by tomorrow and feaze her!"

"Ok Geileis," answered Aine, braids quivering.

"Oh, Aine'll eat with us tonight," said Enid. "A reaper scrozzled on the slope by the larch grove, gurfing like a window washer down a well."

"Fy."

"Yeah, both shims... anyway she's going to help Giorsal and me make the swap after supper."

"By the way y'all..." Geileis said clanninishly.

"...Giorsal gathered pumpkins!"

"Lilies!" answered Enid, wrapping herself in reedy arms and swaying with eyes closed. "I'm craven!"

Giorsal came from the kitchen with hip length, milky ponytails swooshing.

"Hey Aine," she said, "dost tha recall that gingerbread spell...?"

Words tumbled as Geileis spun Gormglaith by the shoulders.

"...And *thou* 'glaithen girl might get to nest ...tidy and bright for supper tonight!"

Geileis smacked Gormglaith's bottom as she ran off with clunchy flashes of teeth and blue lake eyes under a lop of straw thatch, cast a wave at Giorsal and loped down the hall.

Coming to a tidy nest Gormglaith put the sheer gore in a deep window sill, glanced about then stopped short, gazing down with knitted brow. On the low, wide, sleekly slatted elmwood sleeping staddle, snug in a dimple it had made on folded cotton heaps lay a book, an Eachdraidh nan fylgjie, this one the cloth kind with leaves gathered in an ash grey linen binding bedecked with pink runes. The open sheaf was thrown right, to a song.

*In a dale of tales so thrillin'
Plait kin by flaxen linen
Nigh pumpkins on pine needles
Pulling moon to light what's sown...*

She stared outside as the waxing moon lofted higher, dark clouds rimmed with their last dusky broken pumpkin hues and elms swayed, ruffling in the wind.

Gormglaith wandered into a bath with cool, swatched walls of scrubbed bluestone, the smell of natron soap over freshly laundered cotton towels. She hooked thumbs under the wide, folded wrap below her chest and yanked grey linen down the chalkenly sheer, blue green veined skin of belly, thighs, knees and big feet, then sat on her heels. A sprinkling in the water below wafted a fallain hint of leaf and root as she stared hard into grainy folds of feldspar and quartz.

She stood, nudged a swab snugly between her thighs and tapped the pink goblin on the floor with a bare foot. A puff of white hit the whirlpool like a shattered blossom. She went to the sink and gazed at herself, short straw blond thatch falling over an eye, glowing in dusk light. She sucked in her breath, frowned, splashed water on her face, opened a wall cupboard, put on white longstockings (keeping them so rimped behind the knees), dipped her feet into bright yellow wooden klompen with cheerfully drawn daisies, glanced at bare chest and face in the looking glass and spun out the door.

harvest home

Gormglaith sat with Geileis at the latticed blond elmwood board, Giorsal with Gobnait crosswise when Flann tore by, late from some errand, a bright blear of long red hair and freckles, platinum nose ring gleaming, still smelling like her run and the outdoors. Having swapped longstockings Flann came back and slid onto the bench by Gormglaith. Clothed and shod alike, they talked clanninishly.

"Where's the wicked witch?" asked Gormglaith, looking about.

"On the skate back to Kin Dails," Geileis answered with a shrug. "She said she was thrilled to see thee, though."

Enid and Aine came scrubbed and clad like everyone else to alight on smooth elm benches.

"Aine of Knockaine," Geileis said wistfully, chin in hand. "Have I ever told thee how I flip for thy braids? Someday I'm going to grow my hair and have swank brat braids like thine."

Aine smirked.

"Spog," said Enid raising thumbs up, short braids swishing. "Blue cheese string noodlys!"

They told rundling tales, each put starkly with input from the others, handing chalky dishes back and forth whilst a skeletal house robot of like hue whistly filled in the gaps.

"So I frobbed the new hopper first thing," said Giorsal, taking a sip of bluish milk. "A pink bamfed in for a peek and feeped at me! It was the wabbit," she sighed. "I don't get it. Sometimes I think Maiden lane's not the hex I grew up with."

"Like a kludge," said Flann, "munchin' mung 'n toast."

"It's so leeg," said Enid, heedfully wrapping strands of blue cheese string noodlys onto her fork. "The only grass wabbits anyone shares anymore are dodgy bloat. I hack 'em to bits but they're still geef."

"Spell rags..." Aine put with raised forefinger, thick braids sweeping across the wide pink brims on her figgish chest.

"...and hex hags!" Geileis said brightly as the others laughed.

Aine giggled, shoving a stringy forkful into her mouth as Enid wagged a sandy blond head.

"So there's that stoneware dish over a hearth at Findabair's," said Gormglaith, munching on blueberries, "...the one with all the swatches in shades of green they say is six thousand years old..."

Most nodded.

"From afar it looks sound but if you peer close there're thousands of these teeny twining cracks..."

Gobnait laid a billowing glob of chocolate nut mush on a fat slice of gingerbread, gazed up with forefinger to chin and said,

"So Gormglaith, I hear Findabair wants to *plight*. How *thrilling*."

Gormglaith twirled her eyes in a throe.

"...Thought so!" sang Enid, digging her fork into the open top of a baked pumpkin.

"Gobnait," Gormglaith put to her smug little sister, "it so happens Findabair can't plight me alone. It takes at least three."

"I think it's leeg," said Gobnait, taking up the loaded gingerbread with both hands, "how Gweneth did y'all dirt..."

"...So who's the lucky third!?" asked Giorsal, slicing in.

Gormglaith lowered her head.

"Fethnaid 'n Faith Farling," she sighed, staring into a tangle of string noodlys, whirlish and flaxen with spoggens of cheese riddled in blue-green.

"I like those two!" said Giorsal.

Nods broke out across the board. Aine's braids swished as her eyes darted from face to face.

"What is *with* everyone?!" asked Gormglaith. "This isn't how it's meant to be! Where's the puzzling? 'Th'ast time! Th'art barely mae-gden! Maybe th'artn't bent with the Farling twins! What's with all this nodding?!"

She glanced at Geileis who was eating a morsel of sprout.

"So... are those thy feelings," asked Enid, "about Findabair Pane Aghadreen of the Greens and the Farling twins?"

Gormglaith stared at her.

"Yes! I mean no! I mean why is everyone being so mum about this? You're my kynn! Now's the time to ask all kinds of stirring things and make me think about it!"

"My bat..." Enid said with freckled dimple, holding up thumb and forefinger, "seems rather stirred enough."

Gormglaith gaped, speechless. She scanned faces about the board, then gave Enid a beseeching look.

"Truth be told," the witch put with a wink, "I think Geileis wants to have a talk with thee after supper."

The hard packed strawberry ice cream with *Shenn Buffy's sandy shortbread* was fun but they were all more hushed than wonted.

Enid Elm Hafgan Halsen's kin had haunted the hills and dales of West meads by the Running alps for at least six thousand years. The eldest of four sisters and brought in neach, braiding all four of her kynn like none before her, she was fifteen when talk of ash at the bone board

enthralled her to the tides, growth and craft of grasses. At seventeen she left Elmthorpe for five years of school at Rand house in Kin Dails, first living in its nest mazes, later a sprawling, wafered stack of flats by Coo gardens where at a rooftop flurt one chill and blustery Saetereve in early Aerra Geola 5471 Giorsal and Geileis Grendel first laid eyes on her, hanging onto three weary eyed yodelers in a noisy flock.

The storm was dished when ghosts of Enid and Giorsal wound up in the Kin Dails spin of a widely gawked-at rag called *Yah!* A short loop taken at Beltane bannal, a faddish make out den at the time, showed a witchy Giorsal hanging out with Enid and swiping a way keen glance at her (this was more or less only a setup as they were all head over klompen by then). Ever after, when asked why she wasn't in the snaps, Geileis said she was "boning up for the boards" that night.



Giorsal and Enid | a way keen glance

They clannined in the Coo gardens flat and on a snowy winter mid-night thirteen moons later met Flann Raine-Blairie, a deft and waifish shee reading spells and freayll, spending long nights in the same web lair Giorsal haunted. She somehow pulled them even closer together, to play, banter, shriek and laugh, cast sidelong glances and do whatever else girls do when they get stirred up, the whole notion of a fourth, blown in by the gales.

Seven nights after Midsummer's Eve, 28 Aerra Litha 5477 in a nest at Bryn Larach, Gormglaith Grendel Hafgan Halsen tumbled head first in a birth fettle to the hard squeeze through Geileis' hips. She stared wide eyed at the air witch, then wouldn't breathe. The witch took her by the feet, smacked her bottom and Gormglaith gasped ("Suckin' air like a hearth flue on windy nights," as Giorsal put it), then wailed for ten minutes whilst Geileis held her twin daughter with a bleary kynnish smile.

"Come on Gormglaith," Geileis put cannily, clannily, as everyone got up to leave the board, "let's go for a walk."

In the fall night air with a lofted harvest moon waxing high in the sky, their klompen clopping on slate, Gormglaith took Geileis' arm.

"I was going to tell thee something this afternoon when thou came'st in... but with the gore from Devon and thy talk about Findabair and then, Enid and Aine showing up, I didn't have time."

"It's something big, isn't it?"

"I haven't a clue."

The slate stoep was on an edge of the hilltop where Bryn larach stood looking upon the fields, woods and slopes of Hafgan downs, lights sparkling here and there, some blinking and shifting. As moppets, Gormglaith, Findabair and Gweneth had haunted these slabs, playing make believe in a tangle lair from where they watched the craft of their own kynn clannin. More lately as maedchen they'd sat on the low garden wall in midnights, watching bats come and go, swapping kisses under the stars.

Lit by a moonbeam Geileis faced her twin daughter and standing but half an inch taller, took her hands and said,

"In a dale of tales so thrillin', plait kin by flaxen linen."

"Geileis...!?"

"Someone else wants to plight."

"Fleak Feer! I knew it!"

"Likely so, but I was talking about the Sparkenbanes."

Gormglaith stared back open mouthed.

"... *What* am I missing here?"

Geileis sucked a long breath.

"Back when Giorsal and I were in about our fourteenth moon at Rand house we went to one of those crushy Samhain eve flurts at the Ben chee inn and whom should we run into but the sunken eyed henge twins themselves, Morfyd and Morigan Sparkenbane with their rune stern, plighted sister Rathyen, who'd all lately gotten themselves shee at Wrath ness teach, split as witches and done with school. Next thing we knew, the lot of us were up in a hilltop flat where we reeled 'n kissed 'n threw flax blossoms with towards and gabbish shees 'till morning light smote us down... the lane!"

"Night came soon enough and it was stark and starry. We were still living with our kynn on Pine rood. Rathyen and Morfyd showed up at the door like wraiths, grinning scythes, asking us out for walkies by Linden lane henge but we wound up back at the Ben chee inn where they put it straight. Giorsal and I had already let slip we'd only plight together... not *too* much of a hitch since teach clannin plight eight rather than the wonted three or four. Anyway we all ran off to Glas knoll croft at Blairie north of Kin Dails for flirty flurts, gabs and oddly, a moppety goblin game called *fox and goose*. It was all fylgic but I'd tumbled into a gnawsome stitch, thinking *I* was the only one they truly wanted."

"That'd never haunt the henge. I guess even back then I had a stern streak as long as my legs. Giorsal and I slipped away to loch Blairie's wooded shore by a fleet of swans who'd swum up, where she reminded me we'd still be together, living at Haethwyck by Grasp on the coastal cliffs of Wrath ness at the northwestern evermost of the Highlands. Then she wept and said I might plight alone."

"I thought of that tale in the *Eachdraidh*, how 2300 years ago the Banning-Trendels of New Zealand were heartbroken when Meryl Melangell nixed over like worries having to do to her sister Meredith. Plighting another clannin nineteen moons after, they brought in Meryl's twin daughter Morwen of Windborn who later lived a meed life among the Banning-Trendels as a banshee."

"So before swans we grew a wild notion. After witch house and plight, I'd grasp and carry my twin daughter, we'd raise her in a snug clannin spilled with *Eachdraidh nan fylgic* and when a maegden she and the Sparkenbanes might meet."

"Back inside I sat down at a board of black hornblende and wrote in mine own hand,"

Nix. We're wretches like Meryl and Meredith.

"That's when we left home for the nest mazes at school and five nights later we hooked up with Enid..."

Gormglait's eyes glowed in the shift of black light thrown from the harvest moon.

"Later we were so enthralled and busy clannining, we forgot about Sparkenbanes. Bryn larach blossomed, way, with Enid braidin' ash and Giorsal spinnin' robots, Flann tuggin' freayll, me gweepin' hex, all of us home schooling thee and now, Gobnait... but as the years spun off we heard of their plights. They'd soon found their fourth and I was flattered. I knew Tegan Nichneven! She was a dozen moons behind me at Rand house. Then by the time thou wast fifteen there was talk of three banshees..."

"Banshees are meant to plight whist, to thwart fads," said Gormglait. "Together as a flock of four, they rune Wyrð's four stitches, strong, weak, stir 'n trimmid."

Geileis smiled.

"... and with no hint of a fourth we guessed they might be thinking of us after all. Then it came."

"What."

"Thy coorsyn," Geileis answered, laughing, "and thou wast late! But tha bleedst like a maegden now and I got this today," she said, pulling a swatch of cloth from the wrap over her ribs.

"Grainne?"

Geileis quickly shook her head.

It was linen, token of *Eachdraidh*. The runes shone in bright moonbeams, written by a true hand with stark heed:

*In a dale of tales so thrillin'
Plait kin by flaxen linen
Nigh pumpkins on pine needles
Pulling moon to light what's sown
Now fast under elms
Bats beat wings
Whilst dreaming things
Towards fall and Harvest home.*

"Hmph. It's from *Hackled in Hastings*..." said Gormglaith.

"...Tangwen Toreth. They know how to strum the strings, huh? ...Geileis! On the noon after Tangwen wrote this in Rye... two banshees came!"

"I know. I looked it up in thy book."

"What about Findabair?"

"Findabair's like clannin..."

"What'll I do?"

Geileis shook her head as three small bats fluttered nearby.

"Maybe I could hang with them," said Gormglaith, "like for the thrill of it, kind of..."

"There are *seven* of them now and I glark they'll send the two they think'll thrill the most..."

"...to spill 'n sway for kin and clannin," said Gormglaith.

"I'd say *sly*'s the word," put Geileis, smirking.

"What does our shenn Grainne have to say about all this?"

"She's rather stitched on thee, Gormglaith."

"In other words... I might stop to think of *Eachdraidh* and plight my bottom over to Wrath ness like a bred 'n born kin Grendel girl."

"She told me this afternoon she knew all along it would happen. She showed up on her own saying, 'Geileis my bat, thy twin daughter Gormglaith can grip. I know her. It's thee I'm worried about!' She knows everybody," Geileis said with a gangly shrug.

Gormglaith grinned when her twin kynn took her face in hands, kissed her on the mouth then twirled to walk off. As Geileis loped towards a door of wefted panes aglow with yellow light the wind gusted, blowing straw thatch across bright eyes staring up and beyond the wych elms at a beaming harvest moon whilst broken, ragged clouds scuttered across it.

Gormglaith wandered into the farm's tangle lair, wind blown and fallain, linens ruffled, knees grass stained. Enid and Giorsal sat among brightly wafting goblins. A cast of the fat, yellow and black striped bee Gobnait had been playing with hovered near Giorsal now, busily spitting runes. It was harvest and sunrise would find them there.

Enid was once more in grey cutty sark and longstockings, Giorsal but in worn dark green ones with scuffed yellow klompen, milksome ponytails cascading over each shoulder and down her chest. They watched a deftly ghosted earth cast of the moonlit farm with reapers and gleaners amid floating runes and numbers.

"Hi! How's harvest?"

"Harvest..." asked Enid, grey eyes glowing in a blue swath of light throbbing across her face.

Gormglaith watched a goblin made of two fluttering green blobs.

"This one's a bit scrozzy," she said.

"Yeah..." sighed Giorsal, fingers reeling with the bee, "...says it's ok about being a spot heater for now but'll shut down before the birds start singin' anyway to keep from blowing up. How boring."

"It's not like the wonted plight, is it?" Gormglaith blurted out. "I mean a girl's kynn can't say 'Th'art green, th'ast time,' can they, when she'd be a banshee..."

Giorsal, right hand now held over a bright swirling pumpkinish whorl, stared at her.

"Flattery's a craft, Gormglaith and they've got it... with the heed of a burrowing mote scanner."

"Oh Giorsal..."

Enid looked up, bangs sweeping in front of her face.

"What we braid," she put softly singsong, "is what we'll be and wherever Wyrd wends, thou'lt always be our Gormglaith. Although," she said, winking and opening her arms, "if thou dostn't heed Giorsal and *happenst* to run off with them, maybe thou canst do something about those ghastly grain plaits."

They gathered in a tight, clanniny hug and Gormglaith loped out the door into a windswept, moonlit night on the West meads.

Flann stared at a goblin with skeins of bobbing runes and numbers, red hair tumbling upon freckled shoulders, the nose ring between her nostrils catching a glint of pink light as she looked up with doeish, wintergreen eyes.

"Tollin' the watch, eh Gormglaith?" she asked, smiling like a maed-chen.

"Yep, seein' to it my clannin's givin' fylgjie meed of milk and muffins!"

Gormglaith stood smirking.

"I guess we can squeeze something out tomorrow, if thou dostn't ask for too much milk."

"Hast thou heard?"

"Oh yeah."

"So Flann when thou wast a scollagyn at Blairie thou knewst mae-gden who pledged Wrath ness..."

"I think I can stir up the hazy ghost."

"Why didstn't thou go?"

"For one thing I was never asked."

"What if?"

"Not."

"Why?"

"My friends were at Blairie, my whole puff was there. Besides, all I wanted back then was to get into Rand house so I could grok how to be a hardcore, spell sucking freayller witch."

"So when y'all met, I mean, what'dst thou think of the Meryl and Meredith thing?"

"Ok, I thought it was selfish. I told 'em, 'Twins are cool. I'm eighth in a string by the wombs but if you tell her, if you lay nettles on her back, if I ever see you grooming any moppet of ours for Wrath ness, I'm out the door.' As it happened Enid had said rather much the same thing to them."

"Y'all saw to it I got a stiff hit of *Eachdraidh*, though."

"So split for tongue craft, if that's what thou still wantst."

"I've always liked thy nose ring," said Gormglaith, warding a finger and grinning.

"When thou wast on my hip thou never stopped trying to yank it."

They giggled.

"...I'd be asked to pledge Wrath ness teach," said Gormglaith.

"Thou'dst be *told* to pledge Wrath ness teach."

"Which means I'd be a scollagyn, at the teach of teaches."

"That's what they say."

"The scollagyn I've met are lekker, but they wontedly swot up keener and have less time to themselves."

"They've more boards at once than at a witch house, is all."

"Thou always sayest thou liked it..."

"Blairie bairn..." said Flann, smirking.

"...bred, born 'n beaming!" they sang together.

"If thou goest with them, 'glaithen girl, they'll frickin' henge thee."

"Not Geileis."

"Don't forget Giorsal. Some are wont."

"I can grip."

"Look," sighed Flann, "plightin' banshee's no frolic at the feish, ok? Wraithen's one thing, sly's another. Twined it's the hackle."

"What'rt tha tuggin' now?" asked Gormglaith, nodding at the goblin.

"Oh, that... Snotra's dreaded wheat freayll. I'm looking for ways to plait us through it as ever, as *if*, stitch of my life. Along with the wonted lilies, they're luzzin' hints on Maiden lane it might be quickened again. That would be so leeg."

"Is that what I heard Enid and thee talking about today?"

"Bloody likely," she said, eyes flicking to shuffle bobbing numbers.

Gormglaith hugged Flann so tightly her chair spun.

On a nearby hill the sprawling fieldstone house known as Lea Cairn cast a warm blush across moonlit mead grass and elm trunks, its dozens of windows puzzled with corundum panes sparkling in blues, reds, greens, yellows and sheers beneath low overhanging eaves. Gormglaith, back in her wonted short ash cutty sark and grey longstockings with clunky black wooden klompen, walked across the mossy northern stoep by a flock of fluttering bats towards a glow of sweeping lights in sundry hues. She put face and hands against a window which slid open to a swirl of throbbing yodels and gabbing girls, then leapt over the low sill as it shut to the sound of rustling leaves.

Birds were singing when Gormglaith walked through Bryn Iarach's warmly lit back door, stepped out of black klompen, dipped into yellow ones and clopped rather too noisily to the ghost den. She found Geileis listening to clarsach songs, bamfing into some spot somewhere on earth she'd found to wander through before sleep. Gormglaith plopped down hip to hip beside her womb kynn on the low, cotton bolstered bench. Geileis put an arm about her and the twins snuggled in the dusky glow of Snotra with its steep, winding wooded lanes, henges and flower drenched greens where blue loch Frigg splits by the edge of the southern Alps.

"Everyone was there," said Gormglaith, nodding as they stared. "We reeled and stuff. Fethnaid and Faith were like, so cool and cheery, as if *nothing* was happening but they slipped me these looks and canny knew I knew. Meanwhile Glynne was showin' off her new tongue dab, mostly to Keird 'n Keayrt who were their wonted mopey selves by the bye. Anyway I didn't have time to tell anyone a thing and before I knew it, Findabair was folded up asleep on the settle. Fethnaid and I made out, kind of, Faith went into a sulk, the birds were nigh twitterin' so I left."

Geileis gazed at Gormglaith who quickly looked towards the ghost deck at three girls all in black linens, broom witches, skipping, frolicking and lofting sprays of white lily bits at each other among tall, thin cypress trees by the low pink granite walls of old Toreth house on Maiden lane, loch Frigg lapping nigh.

"Yeah, I know."

They fell asleep in each other's arms under the cool glow of a blue light strip.

Through the thatch over her eyes Gormglaith squinted at afternoon light streaming into the den. She popped up, stared, then bounded onto the hard black floor in linen sheathed feet, coming across Geileis in the airy titanium and white clunch kitchen, reading a frosty goblin with a steaming red mug of frothed coffee and a bowl of seeds, grains and milk before her.

"Hi kynnsikins!"

"Hi, my bat!"

Gormglaith tasted Geileis' coffee and made a face.

"I still don't know how thou canst drink this stuff."

"Wait a few dozen moons more, thou wilt!"

Gormglaith took a stray, oozing ruddy rowanberry jelly bun from the board and sloppily ate that whilst looking out the window. It had been raining but the sun peeked now and then from billowing puffy clouds over low fog and misty green.

"Where is everybody?"

"Aine came by. She and Enid have run off, somewhere, Flann's gone hopper stitchin' with Blaithen Brent and Giorsal's in the thorpe with Gobnait."

"Bugged out, huh?"

"I'd say *fled*'s the word."

"I'll do my reading, then."

Geileis raised a thatchen head to watch as her twin daughter loped away.

Gormglaith stepped from the shower bay with lank damp hair, shivered, grabbed a towel and gazed through a narrow window at the leaf strewn stoep where she and Geileis had talked the night before. From the wall cupboard she took worn, frayed grey longstockings, yanked them on, skipped out and plopped onto the cozy, steadfast staddle to flip leaves of *Eachdraidh* with fingers between her legs, twining into tales of wraithen girls by meads and hills and lochs.

Later she glanced up and said evenly, "Haunt Findabair?"

"Hey Gormglaith!" came the choppy greeting of a dozen maegden and maedchen as if they were by the window.

"What happened to thee?!" asked Findabair.

"Thou felst asleep!"

"So?! Anyway we're going up the hill to gather blue daisies. Come with?"

"I can't."

"What's on?"

"A clannin thing..."

"Ok. Meet at the Soohead later?"

"Uhm, I don't know. This might take awhile."

"Sounds kinda big!"

"It is. Snag a daisy for me, ok?"

The others slipped into giggles.

"Y'all?! Ok... bye Gormglaith!"

"Bye Gormglaith!" everybody else echoed singsong.

"Bye."

She lowered her head, brooded, got up, walked over to the laser cut slab desk of chalk limestone and waved a hand near its edge. A smeary blue and white ball popped up, a yard across. She blinked through sundry casts, stopping at one showing splashes of light scattered mostly across the north and south of a moonlit world.

She went to the window and its misty green landscape, took the gore and beamed true hues into a chalken hand.

"Gormglaith? Gormglaith?"

Geileis leaned over her, hair swept forward, smiling.

"It's nearing noon in Rye. I thought thou mayest've gotten lost."

"Ok. I was only reading."

"Swap the linens at least! I'll answer the door if thou wantst."

"I'll do it. I want to see the looks on their faces."

Geileis cast a braided look.

Gormglaith dragged herself from the staddle, lit to the bath, pulled on tidier greys and stared at the looking glass. She ran fingers through her thatch, shrugged, shook it, came back to the nest, put on black klompen, breezed out to the gather lair and faced her kynn with a grin. Geileis looked her up and down, then up again... and nodded.

"Truth be told," said Gormglaith, "I was thinking the same thing about thee!"

"Uh oh."

Gormglaith's grin swayed into a broad smile.

"So if thou needst me," said Geileis, shoving back a stray bit of straw thatch, "I'm here."

"Don't worry, twinsikins," she put with a shrug. "I can grip."

"I *know*..."

They heard a low thump outside as Gormglaith waved a bony, blue veined hand at the latch.

swans and magpies

The banshees gaped and stared, then giggled. The taller girl's long freckled face belied a shrewd look with popinjay eyes and a toothy lopsided smile. Thin as a sheaf of wheat, straight red hair tumbled to her bottom whilst narrow braids tied off by sleeves of many hued threads fell with flat locks over a black cutty sark. Each wore a sparkling platinum nose ring grazing the top of her lips. Alikely wraithish in black longstockings they walked in blond wooden klompen.

"Hi Gormglaith, I'm Bairrfhionn Sparkenbane," said the taller one, holding out a hand, her smile an edgy sway. "I'm thrilled to meet thee!"



Bairrfhionn | belied a shrewd look

"Hi!"

"Gwenhwyfer," the other put shyly with more than a hint of Frisian lilt, her yellow, chin length hair freaked with white, swaying lank at the sides but combed straight back on top, nose ring glinting over blackened lips as she leaned forward to grasp hands.



Gwenhwyfer | more than a hint of Frisian

"Hi!" Gormglaith echoed like meeting someone at a home schooling get together as Bairrfhionn spotted her twin.

"Thou'rt Geileis. I've always wanted to meet thee."

"Morfyd and Morigan often talk about thee," said Gwenhwyfer, taking Geileis' hand

"...and we think of them."

Geileis showed the banshees to a low elmwood bench padded in blue grey cloth and wrapped by a paned window bay looking over the foggy hills and meads beyond Bryn larach.

"Coffee?"

"Please!"

The banshees plopped down as Gormglaith sat on an elm block and leaned forward.

"So..." Bairrfhionn said with a toothy grin, "I hope thou dostn't think we're like, wanton or whatever for trampling in on thee like this."

"No way! My friends do it all the time."

"I like the elms on the lane out in front!" said Gwenhwyfer.

"I climb them."

The banshees smiled.

"To hang with the magpies," said Gormglaith, nodding once. "I've fed them since I was little, the bats too, upstairs in the southeast loft. They were there when my kynn came to Bryn larach and nobody had the heart to put them out."

"Bats!" said Gwenhwyfer, her sunken sky blue eyes widening. "Ker-fuffle!"

Flighty banter fluttered as Geileis came from the kitchen with three coffees in brightly puzzled mugs along with rowanberry in a heavy tumbler.

"I hear tales of Bryn larach's haunted lofts! How was your trip?"

"We took the skate from Fen Glioon," said Gwenhwyfer. "I told Bairrfhionn I think it's dreamy out here. So gloomy! The afternoon light on the hills is amazing."

Gormglaith sipped ruddy rowanberry whilst watching the banshees from behind a lock of straw blond thatch.

"So... are y'all gonna put it straight or what?"

Gwenhwyfer gasped (with a grin) as Bairrfhionn twirled her eyes.

"We have like, this song."

"Kewl."

The banshees of Wrath ness swapped glances, shrugged, then like maegden gone stir behind the fizzy tent on Midsummer's eve, they spoke as rain swept by outside.

*Dreams loom
It's harvest soon
Scythe of wending Wyrð*

*Let's canny walk
These moors of knots
Where swans and magpies lurk*

*Such words they fling
Kin stabbed with rings
Their shivering sings*

*To crush until
They spill and sway
In plighted clannin.*

Bairrfhionn and Gwenhwyfer waited wide eyed, abashed.

"...Y'all!? That was so too stern! Ok... what happens now?"

The banshees grinned wraithenly.

"Oh Gormglaith how thrilling!" Gwenhwyfer put with balled, wag-gling hands. "Come with to Glas knoll! It's on the loch by Blairie in a chilling, way too misty wood!"

"I heard it spins."

"...Are the swans still there?" Geileis asked helpfully whilst casting a broad smile at Bairrfhionn.

"They swim up to you and talk!"

*Winsome fleet of shrugs
On water still and black
Abide these weepy hugs
Till we've come braiding back!*

The banshees gazed at Gormglaith (as Geileis beamed).

"Why do I know that's *Eachdraidh*?" asked Gwenhwyfer, smirking.

"Tamsyn to the swans," answered Gormglaith, "when hippies drove her clannin from Siouxi Falls."

"Did they ever come back?" asked Bairrfhionn.

"They did but the swans were gone and the house had been stripped."

"How ghastly. The wretched swans," said Gwenhwyfer.

"Anyway her sisters said Tamsyn wept so many tears into that pond it went to saltwater and no guilbneach ever came again. So the rune is... Tamsyn was selfish for bygone nights. As if the pond went to salt, so too her heart."

"I've heard th'art crack with *Eachdraidh*," said Bairrfhionn.

"I want to scatter in tongue craft and split on it."

"So when were y'all thinking of leaving for Blairie?" asked Geileis, bright and kynnish.

Gormglaith stared at her as the banshees swapped looks.

"Uhm... now?"

"I wish you'd each tell me you won't stay up after sunrise..." said Geileis.

Bairrfhionn and Gwenhwyfer nodded like moppets.

"We won't, Geileis Grendel Hafgan Halsen."

"Gormglaith?"

"Ok."

"Eat fallainly and be *stern*!" said Geileis, rising from the bench. "Oh, and have fun!"

"So..." said Gormglaith, "I guess there's some stuff I'd like to take... wanna see where I nest?"

"Way!"

The three rambled there. The earth cast was still on and she showed them *Eachdraidh* and gore (which they cooed over) along with a few other things. They looked out upon sun smudged gloom through the window then peered in at the bluestone bath. Gormglaith opened the wall cupboard with stacks of neatly folded longstockings and thumbed through them. As if chiding herself for a botch, Bairrfhionn cast up her eyes.

"Thou wilt'nt need a thing," she said, hands on hips. "We'll be stopping in Kin Dails first for shopping and lunch, I mean if that's ok..."

"Tha meanst is it like... *ok* if I get scammed with linen and spog by a crushy yoke of bodeful swank banshees or what."

They nodded, smirking.

"I can grip!" she said, throwing up her hands.

Back in the gather lair, Gormglaith wore an embroidered dark blue green cutty sark and carried a cloth satchel holding only gore and *Eachdraidh* as Geileis spun about from the window with a grin.

"By the way Bairrfhionn," she said, "my sisters'll tease me if I don't needle thee and ask about the wheat freayll."

Bairrfhionn matched Geileis' grin.

"...Flat."

"Oh?" she answered, looking back out through the window panes. "Green greens everywhere... so thick and deep, you know it's Harvest home..."

"It's lunch in Kin Dails," said Gormglaith.

"That sounds merry! I hope you won't spoil her *too* much."

Bairrfhionn and Gwenhwyfer came back with bright stares.

They all gathered in a clump. Gormglaith tilted her head, rushed to Geileis and with banshees gazing in wraithen whist, clasped her in a snugsome hug.

The sled waiting by Bryn larach was a dark steelish green whilst within were bent elmwoods and flaxen cloth. Gormglaith climbed in first, sliding across a tightly padded seat which greeted her deftly as the banshees lankily followed. The front window bulged out before them, spanning to klompen.

"The skate stop," said Gormglaith.

The hatch sealed with a muffled thump, the sled rose a yard and went slowly forward. After many waves Geileis stood alone on the wet flatstones and as they whisked about a bend in the lane she was hidden behind a hedgerow looming in the mist.

Gormglaith glanced through the sloped window at a sky dappled in white, grey and gold, dark in a rainy east, sunbeams falling in shafts to the west as the sled flowed whist along the lane. It sped up nimbly and they soon came to Elinthorpe, its mead henge of chalk limestone slabs tucked under a stand of tall elms, a trim row of shops on the nearby greens bustling with thrallish clanniners. Gormglaith seemed to flatten herself into the seat as they neared a brimming row of flowering blueberry bushes below a wide, sparkling window aglow with slinky pink runes spelling *The Soohed*. The sled slid by a black pond where a flock of moppets hovered at its edge with a dozen swans.

"I flip for a thorpe on the West meads," Gwenhwyfer sighed in a Frisian flauting, looking to and fro. "So barrowish and tidy."

At the frosted corundum shelter beneath leafy boughs and gossiping magpies, someone else was waiting for the skate. Hidden by waist length wheatish blond hair and wearing grey linens with a birch hued cutty sark, she looked up from runes streaming out of the ghosted purple goblin which hovered over her lap. Gormglaith told Wynne the banshees' first names and said this was one of Glynne Hafgan's kynn. Wynne looked them over and smiled. The goblin went back to spewing runes.

Meanwhile nearby under a tall and awnish elm four moppets played with a glittering green jump rope, two reeling side by side betwixt the twirlers, singing in loops.

*One for sorrow
Two for mirth
Three for plighting
Four for a birth
Five for freayll
Six forlorn
Seven for a witch
I can tell thee no more*

Catching sight of Gormglaith and the banshees, all four ran up onto the dock by the skate lane's narrow, laid groove. They were eight or nine, in rumpled grey longstockings of sundry shades with bright wooden klompen and came to a clattering, skidding halt bringing the hot smells of play. Sly and canny faces peered keenly from behind tousled hair of many lengths and hues.

"Hi y'all!" said Gormglaith. "...Wicked *Magpie reeling!*"

"Hi Gormglaith!" they came back choppily. "Thanks!"

"What's it all about, then?" pried a skinny bairn with tangled, pinkishly brindled sandy blond hair falling by nebbish ears and raised eyebrows.

"Does Findabair know about thee?" asked another with stringy neck length white hair and grass stained knock knees, warding a finger at Bairrfhionn as the others giggled.

"I don't know," put Bairrfhionn, grinning and shaking her head.

"I see..." said the moppet, crossing her eyes. "How cracking!"

Breaking into more giggles they tore off the dock, clopping, skipping, zooming and shrieking with the boundless birr moppets have.

As Gormglaith watched after them (running straight for the Soohed) a trim and airy skate of scrubbed silver bearing geal yellow and flax blossom blue runes glid into the stop with little sound. They went through a wide wooshing door and sat crosswise in cloth seats the hue of greywacke and lit by sticks of light. Gormglaith settled by Gwenhwyfer, Bairrfhionn facing them whilst Wynne Hafgan wafted down two seats behind. As they pulled away Gormglaith's eyebrows knitted and she slid into a slouch.

Leaving Elmthorpe the skate swept up to blurring speed and rain soon pattered the windows. Gwenhwyfer called up *song seventeen* and tightly thrown sound waves put forth throbsofely braided reels and yodels with the high shift eight upons Gormglaith and her friends liked, not the wave loop sixteens their kynn mostly listened to.

"Gale in the dales!" said Gwenhwyfer. "Kew!!"

Gormglaith gazed at Bairrfhionn and they swapped grins as a skate came from the other way with a thumping flash. After a stop at stormy Avalon with its old sunken fylgic henge the skate skipped loops to a dozen thorpes, streaking through pockets of fog across the dimpled hills and harvest fields of the West meads in Halegmonath. Some had rows of pulled flax left to dry, others were littered with thatchen shocks of wheat sheaves. Wynne waved as she got off under the rowan ash trees of Caorann and for a time they were alone although as Kin Dails neared, many girls boarded.



West meads | thatchen shocks

"Hast thou been to Slinn's?" asked Gwenhwyfer.

"Twice. I think. They weave bedecked wraps."

"Thine isn't..." said Bairrfhionn, watching a far off, darkly swaying green grove of ash trees slip slowly by beyond tall breck.

"...I like it," she put with her lopsided smile over a shivering reel.

"Enid says a stark chest haunts the henge, even at flurts."

"That's stern."

Gwenhwyfer's yellow, white freaked locks swung across sunken eyes as she grinned like a scythe.

"I've heard that grass witch has a grip!"

kin dails

Soon enough they were on the outskirts of misty Kin Dails with its waferish clusters of shops and houses below pitched roofs of woodsy green, baked clay tiles nestled among rowan ash, yew and pine trees. The skate slipped under lanes, came to a sliding stop and opened its doors with a fwoosh. They made their way through a chilly, sparsely lit slate lobby to a deep and barrowishly slabbed opening at the north end of Running west way on the high banks of the Running river.

Under broken clouds, wandering flocks of girls strolled by shops and inns. Here were sundry clanniners, their scattered bairn in arms along with moppets, maedchen, maegden and shees, many on two wheelers and some riding bunchberries, those bright pumpkin-red bikes left about by the shops in many thorpes and towns, kept up by spindly, alikely hued robots in the stillness after sunrise. At a crossway by a gwli a bunchberry cut in front of them and a long legged girl holding on tight from behind to the one she'd dutched with flashed a witchy smile at Gormglaith. The bike hit a bump and she bounced, her chin length, snow streaked strawberry hair flying up as they whisked out of sight by the corner.

With straw thatch windblown in the cool crisp air Gormglaith gazed at skies of trundling clouds over low, weftish buildings faced in stones, clunches, wackes and sheer corundums as flocks of birds flew in vees far above the churning water.

From afar Slinn's front windows seemed dark blue but let through true hues up close. Within were keenly lit wraiths, robots heedfully hatched and sized to look like any girl in outward cast and shift, loitering in sundry clothes, klompen and so on. Beyond weirish blue doors Gormglaith and the banshees were greeted by the linen shop's sharply woven smells as a shee in yellow longstockings staggered slinkily nigh in reeling klompen, hollow and black, pitching her toes straight down, the tops of her linen sheathed feet facing them whilst behind her ankles big bighty wooden heel balls were juttied out and lifted on high. Hence she walked only by craft, thews in her long legs pulled way taut beneath yellow linen, thrusting her hips with shoulders thrown back, ever keening into the only narrow throw of steadiness to be had.

"Hi y'all," she said, smirking with witchily put boredom and a shrug so shallow it hardly happened.

The wrap of rainbow hues over the shee's ribs matched her hair of banded hues, chopped short in a swatch swaying across the shaved back of her neck. Earrings lurked about and she wore a blue nose ring on the faal betwixt her nostrils.

"Hey, Greer!" said Gwenthwyfer. "Meet Gormglaith Hafgan Halsen, from Elmthorpe!"

"Haunted, Gormglaith," answered Greer, hair swishing as she nodded towards the fitting lair.

Gormglaith shrugged and followed the smoothly lurching shee, grinning back at the banshees.

Standing naked with hands behind her neck, Gormglaith was scanned head to toe by a skein of red laser slashes and strobing flashes as Greer peered at a spinning goblin.

"If thou'lt wait I'll bring something for thee to try on..."

"Ta!" said Gormglaith, sitting bonily on a bench, her chalken, blue green veined skin as if inner lit before the lair's smooth, black flint walls. Glancing about, her gaze was snared by a life sized, slowly spinning cast of... Gormglaith with wan smile, eyes blinking, in sandy hued Slinn's linens and bright red Dutch klompen. She flicked her eyes to swap out hues and cuts, settling on a natty, short black cutty sark, open fingered black armgloves under the sleeves, then pink longstockings with a tuck-over wrap and for the last, big black wooden klompen like those she had on.

"Here we are..."

Greer held out neatly folded, new white linen.

"...Glen pelyn longstockings," said the shee, "the linen's pell twillen in a fourteen gauge, three upon six looped weave with a pleated wrap."

Gormglaith knitted her brow at this gear of *Eachdraidh*, pell twillen longstockings if ever there were, woven neach for each in sundry weights and hues, pulled up to the breastbone over a true straight waist, a deft, steadfast and footed slice of clannin life for thousands of years but Glen pelyn was one of the first fylgjie runes of gathered x².

Gormglaith pulled the linen over feet, legs, waist and ribs, nudging a wide and swirling, freely pleated wrap snugly up under her chest. Watching the looking glass as her black cutty sarked, pink longstockinged ghost stood by blinking through a leveled gaze, she nodded lightly.

A deep dark blue skeletal robot slouchily brought and handed her a sleeved and collarless white cutty sark of cloth like the longstockings but heavier and slippery inside. This fell high about her waist with abiding fit, its hems widely embroidered with a knotty braid from threads of the same hue but in sundry thicknesses. Lastly the robot held up big, raw blond alder wood klompen still smelling of sawdust. Gormglaith clapped out to pithy nods.

"Gasping! Findabair would kick a shawn trews seein' me in this gear!"

They lingered to watch the wraiths whilst Greer gabbed with Gormglaith, then walked south in a light throng, staring here and there into shop windows as a steady wind blew through their hair.

"A Ben chee inn!" Bairrfhionn said breezily. "I always come here when I'm in Kin Dails."

This was a sprawling low house flaunting skeins of sheer and frosty walls under a deep eaved, hipped and shallow pitched bright pumpkin hued roof. Set on the middle of its long peak was a closely gapped stack of seven flat and thick, dish shaped quartz wafers widening steadily from the smallest bottom one to make up the shape of a top, which looked rather like an upended gore from any line of sight and was always inner lit a clean bluish white even in sunstorms.

Going through the latticed door they met three twins in pink longstockings and deeply embroidered black cutty sarks. Big steely grey eyes peered from canny faces beneath high foreheads, long white hair pulled tight into thick braids woven with wan ribbons tumbling to the smalls of their backs.

"Hi Bairrfhionn," the middle one said shyly.

"Hey Gley!"

"Glare, Gley and Glynt Glynnis..." whispered Bairrfhionn as they walked on, "bairn sisters... plighted wyrd witches... norns! ...and so too wanton. They're only in their sixties, after all. Never mind I've heard no more than a dozen words out of Glynt since I've known them."

Gormglaith glanced back as Glynt looked over a shoulder and thrust out her crimson, lapping tongue, flashing red dab set smack in the middle.

The maegden from Elmthorpe was slackjawed as they came into the airy inn and were greeted by an edgy waif neachly clad all in black down to oversized klompen. She led them to a board next to a wide window looking on white-topped water churning by boulders the size of houses.

Then came Gogan, a skinny, fig breasted ben chee with board flat belly, glowsome pumpkin-hued nose ring and short, thick, flax freaked milkish hair. The sides and back of her head were shaved to the ear tops and a chalken cleft sloped in the narrow teardrop flue of wan longstockings with heavily sewn seams splitting the backs of her legs from high waist to the bighty heels of thoroughly thrashed raw wooden klompen.

"Hey Sparkies! Who's the duck?" she asked, shrewdly eyeing the new face as goblins popped up in front of the three girls taking their seats.

"Hey!" said Gwenhwyfer. "This is Gormglaith Hafgan Halsen and... Gogan the poggen," she put with a smirk (at Bairrfhionn).

Gogan twirled her eyes and held out a yarnishly veined hand. A bit later she was back, stalked by a bonesome robot which handily set before Gormglaith and Gwenhwyfer what they'd both asked for, blueberry shakes with Swiss cheese and summer squash butties. Bairrfhionn got one of bloody ox thew and toothily tucked into it.

Clanniners and shees gabbed among flirty ben chees like Gogan. Gormglaith spotted someone, in pine green linens and a thorough simper, framey shoulders under ruddy braids, hands grasping the edge

of her seat. Sitting with her so close was a spindly, twiggish girl whose big ears peeked from long ginger hair of many freaks and shades which fathomed upon thewisch thighs also in pine green. Now and then she kissed her sister on the mouth or cheeks leaving dark red echoes, clannin runes of steadfastness for all to see. Two more alikely clothed clanniners sat with these two. One had chin length ginger hair swept away from a thoughtful looking face and it took a while to see she and the outgoing one were twins. The fourth had blazing locks cut much like Gogan's, a rainstorm of freckles and glittering grass green eyes which seemed to make speech needless. Later a cake bearing its grove of kindled wax candles was brought on and everyone at the Ben chee inn yodeled one way or another for the clanniner's birthday as she leaned back on her palms grinning like a maedchen, cheeks littered with red kiss smudges, thighs together, shins and Frisian klompen splayed awkwardly afar. She blew out eighty-seven bright flickers with a single breath, then sat with a gummy smile amid thick bane smoke.

At another board sat twins of middling height, heedlessly slender with wide set blue eyes, sunken and wraitish, set above straight long noses bearing sparkling nose rings. Each had short white hair split on the left, combed over in a straight lock hiding half her face whilst falling to chin length on the right. With chalken Glen pelyn longstockings hiked up fast to all but flat chests they sat leaning against each other, heads in tilt, withdrawn and cool. Crosswise three birrish girls sat laughing and talking, their backs to Gormglait. The twin at left smiled in some answer as the other raised her chin, threw a lasering stare from behind a dripping lock of waxen hair and puckered full pink lips... at Gormglait.

Flustered, she looked down at her glassish dish and when she peered up the girl was slouched on her sister's shoulder, sipping coffee, gazing off afar and looking bored out of her mind.

"Did she luzz thee a kiss?" Bairrfhionn asked, startling Gormglait again as she took a sip of purple berry shake.

"Yeah, I think so."

Bairrfhionn smirked.

"Those are the Leighs and that's Kyle. Don't mind her, she's a flirt. They're builder witches. The two in black are Camble and Cait. They tug freayll for Westwreathe sleds. Kyle's twin Kale plighted *much*

later by the bye. The shee in grey with the hips is Braithlin Raine-Blairie Sparkenbane, Blairie girl. She was a scollagyn at Wrath ness, not with us... before... split rainbows there getting herself shee, did a teaching throw at Woolf house in Fen Glioon, took a year off to carry our own Rathyen at Blairie, came straight back to Grasp and taught string spells for sixty some odd years, then hooked up with the Leighs here in Kin Dails. I happen to know she spins the nest with a titanium hand. They're all in their mid hundreds now. I think they're dishing us. I hope th'artn't *too* ruffled..." Bairrfhionn put with a lopsided grin.

Gormglaith laughed giddily, quickly putting hand to mouth as she ruddled her head towards a long board seating more than a dozen twin sisters with fresh, evenly put faces, big elfen eyes, thin-lipped mouths and wispy overbites, alike even to their platinum nose rings, straight light bane blond hair falling down bony backs, slate blue grey linens and wan yellow klompen. The dish in front of each held roots and twirly noodyls steeped in yoghurt. One girl carried a daughter in the tenth, last month before birth and those seated nearby gave her much heed.

"Thrush Kin Dails," Gwenhwyfer whispered, "m7733n tide. They're ninety clannin, all shees, along with a few dozen kindel and as many scollagyn. They look sly, don't they? I'd glark one or two of these is in her early three hundreds. They've had a thorpe and teach north of Kin Dails for three thousand years and they're so bloody stern about it!"

"It started with one neach clanniner," said Gormglaith as she watched a thrush put an ear to her sister's fat belly, then answer with a bright smile. "Threndil Thrush, whose clannin brought in four of her twins."

After that it was mostly gossip about Kin Dails and even some girls Gormglaith had met at flurts through her shenn Grainne, along with wry gab about the neighbourhood plaits. She grinned at first, then seemed puzzled, whereupon talk swayed back to Slinn's.

"Wraiths are so swank," sighed Gwenhwyfer, taking a huge bite of cheese and squash butty, "from afar."

"When I was eleven," said Bairrfhionn, "I saw this way fetching wraith and asked my kynn Kathryn why we didn't keep them as house robots or whatever. Her mood! '...How might we slaughter happiness, thou meanst!'"

"Even so they're fun to watch," said Gwenhwyfer, winking. "Hast th'ever seen the makers' runes on the smalls of their backs? Some shees, even clanniners, I've heard..." the banshee whispered, crinkling her nose magpie, "wear washable ones... to make believe!"

Gormglaith stared at Gwenhwyfer.

"Not at Haethwyck," Bairrfhionn said with the sweep of a hand. "Then there's *Cragen's skeeal* in the *Eachdraidh*..."

"...when unruned, talking wraiths were in most teaches and homes, Cragen said to her worried handfastlings, 'Who bloody *cares* if they're robots? We live with fifteen of them and do I look twisted!?' Soon after that, she all by herself wrecked six moons' freayll of leeks, then later wrote a rather reekish book about smells," the banshee put with her grin, holding a last shred of booty.

Gogan and the sulking robot showed up with coffee in pumpkin hued mugs, "...Wicked enough," put Bairrfhionn, "to jolt a thrall after the Samhain eve hayride," and sparkling earth water for Gormglaith, a new kind in a frosty blue corundum jug which Gwenhwyfer took up for a closer look. Later Gogan came back and cradled Bairrfhionn's head in her arms.

"It's a pog nog, i'nit?" said Bairrfhionn, smirking waggishly.

"Whatever?!" Gogan threw back, shaking her head.

Bairrfhionn latched, followed by the other two.

"Gogan that *was*... so spog," said Gwenhwyfer, shaking her head.

"*Thou* art spog," put Gormglaith, chin in hands.

"Now then..." Gogan said with raised eyebrow, hands on hips, "y'all are gonna be *canny* stern... 'k?"

They nodded (quickly).

"Don't..." she sneered, eyes narrowed, pumpkin-hued nose ring gleaming, "botch this one."

Three chided heads shook (quivering).

With the wave of a bony hand Gogan flashed her grin, spun and clopped off as the two thick seams diving over a taut bottom and down the backs of straight, sturdy legs cast a stirring lilt to her steady, hard bonk on thrallish wooden klompen.

"I don't know about anyone else," said Gwenhwyfer as they left the inn, "but as ever this cheery little moot with Gogan has dunked me in the *loch*, I can tell you."

Gormglaith giggled, bringing hand to mouth, looking at Gwenhwyfer with mirthful eyes and a bashful nod.

"So how 'bout it?" asked Gwenhwyfer, smirking tightly at Bairrfhionn.

With a wry smile the banshee held forefinger nigh to thumb.

This was a hazy late afternoon and they strolled along shady green lanes, saying little at first, casting glances at shop windows and each other. Bairrfhionn knew many girls in the street by name and waved a lot, stopping to swap snatches of gab.

"Breck!" called Bairrfhionn. "Greer told us *everything*... how couldst thou bear it?!"

"Aw, 'twas sweet naughts," said a freckle nosed, yellow haired shee in a high cropped pink cutty sark and ash linens with a fist widthed, gore shaped earring of wafer thin, wan feldstone swinging from her right ear. "Hey, speaking of which, I saw Too slim last Wodnesdaeg!"

"Please tell me thou wast in Follym downs..." Bairrfhionn beseeched.

"No! She was here! Staying at Flaunys, in Flet!"

Going by an empty shopfront Gormglaith peered into its alcove where a knot of five girls in rumpled longstockings of sundry hues shoved against each other in standing, clasping snog, thews of thighs and bottoms deeply cast in sharp shadows.

"Ah, Kin Dails," Bairrfhionn sighed, then knit her brow. "Hey Gwenhwyfer, wasn't that Hester? With a flock of south enders?"

They walked in a hush.

"I don't dish, Gormglaith," Bairrfhionn blurted out, "but I have a big mouth, tha knowst?"

"Ha!" she answered, gazing at two watchful girls in bright red longstockings and short cutty sarks, their braided hair bedecked with wildflowers, herding a flock of moppets at *Fand's flurty fraig*, a food stand dappled in the glow of shifted black light from the sun.

"Rather like Findabair!"

Gormglaith didn't see the startled looks she got back.

They came to an open air food keep with dozens of stalls under many-hued awnings fluttering in a brisk wind. Some were kept by weird, fetching robots, others by girls in longstockings across the rainbow amid sundry roots, leaves, droops, berries, stalks, fungus and more. In this flood of tugging, shifting smells Gormglaith watched a fleet of maegden in black linens and the matching cutty sarks of Rand house with its ringed, brightly runed token stitched on the left front. They stood in looming pink klompen, earnestly eyeing heads of lettuce splayed by a gabbish, flaxen thrall in very alikened streaky green. Meanwhile at a wildly pitched stand for chocolate, a flock of moppets with a few sullen maedchen in their early teens hovering coolly nigh had gathered about a tall shee in longstockings with wide black and white swatches running even across her stark chest, face and spiky hair. Some moppets screamed with outstretched arms and splayed hands as she nimbly waved, smirked, popped a white or black milljan of spog into her mouth, twirled her eyes and rubbed a barely scooped tummy to high pitched shrieks and laughter.

"I craved those when I was little," said Gormglaith.

Bairrfhionn led them to a stand with red and green striped awnings over heedful casts of apples and runes reading, *Apple stitch - 67 braids*. Here was a clanniner with gold and ginger brindled, plaited hair, clad in rust-red longstockings and lurking behind slatted blond wooden boxes of neatly, rather too steeply stacked apples. She threw Bairrfhionn a witty smile and put in a neat Silesian spin,

"I didn't know *thou* wast in town!"

"Hey Dagmar!"

"The kissin' kin took a *box* of braeburns last Tiwesdaeg!"

Dagmar and the banshee gabbed in whispers which leaked "*Too slim... harvest...*" and "*...she said that?!...*" as the other two sniffed apples.

They left the stand each carrying a big samhuinn ooyl, fresh from an orchard the night before, deep grained red with pumpkinish streaks and green leaves still on the stems. The apples popped as they bit into them to find snowy insides like sweet, tart pears.

blairie

They came to woodsy Rand mead and a small, sunken fylgjic henge in a thicket of red berried rowan ash trees. Gormglaith ran ahead and eagerly warded the banshees inside to look at Braile Raine-Blairie's *Pulling moon*, a cast of it two yards across, laser cut with deep heed on a hollow ball of blue-grey corundum. Nearby they took shallow stairs down to a chalky barrow lit by bounced sunlight and were soon bunched in an airily crowded tram making busy stops in a thickly leafed neighbourhood. Gormglaith and the banshees were by themselves again when the tram streaked through shallow mead hills. The low, waferish houses of Kin Dails faded into mist whilst puffy, cloudlike sheep grazed on a sloping green, drawing the wonted oohs and ahs along with dazed, whist glomming. Gliding into dark pine woods the tram's speed was nigh uncanny given all the tight sways and skirts between high hedgerows nearly sweeping its sides. After strobing tree trunks with glimpses of a dark blue-green loch the tram slid into a shady stop called *Blairie*.

Bairrfhionn, Gwenhwyfer and Gormglaith walked abreast down a hazy, treesome and cobblestoned lane by many houses. They came upon a beech grove where popinjays, magpies and finches fussed and twittered overhead as three girls, stark but for the bulky, webbed gloves on their left hands, played a rundling robin game of blinding catch with a small red hardball. A black tabby with grey tigerish stripes and leopardy black spots stopped to gaze up and puzzle with striking green-gold eyes and a pink nose, greet them with a speechy miaow, get coos, pats and scratches on the head from Gwenhwyfer and slink into a hedge.

Beyond lurked Glas knoll, a tangled and knotty weave of smooth, mossy green granite. Under a wan sky crackled with blue they climbed wafered, leaf strewn metal and slushstone steps in a cool breeze wafting whiffs of beech, pine and hints of yew. A door crafted in sundry woods opened and the banshees warded Gormglaith to go first.

Inside were white granite walls of many shades and roughnesses holding old tapestries in the slyly lean, early Frisian style. High above the black spinel stone floors was deeply boxed wood craft set with birch, elm, yew and ash. The gather lair had a big, snug looking, black bolstered settle on a rug cannily embroidered with Celtic knots before a wide ghost deck backed with dark inlaid schorl. On either side tall

windows brought sweeping sights of the loch, its wooded eastern shore about a furlong away.

South of the gather lair was a supper cove with a weftishly paned, corner wrapping window and black hornblende board set on a slanted leg of lasered pink quartz lit from within between matching benches. Off to the side was an open, sleek kitchen.

"How cozy," said Gormglaith.

"I like coming here," put Gwenhwyfer. "It's a bright haunt with egg tales."

At the kitchen taps for drinks, Bairrfhionn took bogberry and Gormglaith had ginger crush in a heavy tumbler. Gwenhwyfer drew the same.

"Gwenhwyfer slashes ginger crush!" said Bairrfhionn.

A nest off the supper cove looked on thick green woods and a sliver of loch Blairie. The deeply overhanging eaves of a yellow tiled, ivy clad house hovered startlingly close by. A low black granite staddle stacked with thick, fluffy layers of deep dark blue cotton hemmed wide windows and a glowing strip of runes cut out and backlit in icy blue ran above head level along smooth black hornblende walls. The three of them walked to Glas knoll's crosswise end and into a nest with a rune strip of quartzes in many hues and a floor striped in blond hardwoods. Like the supper cove it had a big corner wrap window beyond which a fleet of swans swam near the grassy shore.

"Th'art in thy shenn's croft!" said Bairrfhionn. "Take either nest, we'll have the other."

"The settle's dreamy too!" Gwenhwyfer put with a nod. "So how 'bout a wee walk to Blairie?"

In a bath walled and floored with wide black spinel stone tiles they stood at a looking glass squeezing a silvery pouch of bluish purple mush, spreading it on faces and hands as girls are wont to do late fall afternoons on the West meads.

A sharp breeze flipped Gormglaith's thatch as they stood on the loch bank behind Glas knoll.

"Are there fish in it?"

"Big docking ones, gold mostly," said Bairrfhionn. "Some'll eat from thy hand, mallards too!"

"I like the swans," said Gormglaith, warding a forefinger with arm straight.

The swans swam up quickly as the three bent over and scrunched to stroke the birds and talk to them, then strolled along the windswept path hugging a peaty, lappy shore with thick stands of trees hiding a few crofts on the left. Gormglaith yawed her head as a ruddy golden splash broke through the rippling dark water.

They walked onto a lochside mead and saw maybe twenty girls kicking and running after a black and pumpkin swatched football. Some were maegden but most were maedchen or moppets and all wore handy looking white longstockings, many grass stained and mud streaked. A dozen came tearing down the hill to flock about them.

"Hey Bairrfhionn!" yelled a tall scollagyn, long blond braids flying as she leapt down the brecky slope.

"Hey!"

"Blaanid dished!" the scollagyn said breathlessly, dripping wet from the game.

"So how 'bout it?" asked Bairrfhionn, hands on her hips.

"Ok!"

The maegden stood beaming and fresh faced as Bairrfhionn nudged her crinkling nose with a forefinger. Leveling deft hazel eyes she held out a hand to Gormglaith.

"I'm Feegan."

"I'm Gormglaith... from Elmthorpe."

"Art thou pledging Wrath ness?!"

"Maybe!"

A wispy moppet with keen holly green eyes and long white hair in a stranded tumbling tangle tugged at Gwenhwyfer's leg.

"Gwenhwyfer! Kick a few!"

"This is Beiwe," she said, smirking.

Beiwe hid shyly behind Gwenhwyfer's leg, peering up at Gormglaith.

"Hi Beiwe," said Gormglaith, leaning down to grasp her hand. "I have a little sister who's rather like thee!"

The moppet kept her mouth tightly sealed.

"Beiwe," said Gwenhwyfer, "I can't play football now... but how 'bout walking us to the teach?"

"Ok. The game was leeg anyway."

"Beiwe!" said Feegan, hands on hips. "Take it back! Even if it was leeg, the game was for fun and there's no want of scathing polls even if tha *canst* kick a few like a brat. Save it for thy match next week with Thrush Kin Dails since we both know what little thrushikins would say, don't we?"

Beiwe looked at the ground, biting her lip with knitted brow.

"Sorry," she mumbled, throwing out her arms and letting them flop back to her sides.

The stroll carried on as Gormglaith glommed at Bairrfhionn and Feegan walking ahead, the scollagyn's bottom something like two small footballs squished together and rubbing inside her rippled white long-stockings whilst the banshee's made like sway in black. Gormglaith heard the words *beechee, gasping... splits*. Chatting with Beiwe, Gwenhwyfer watched Gormglaith from the corner of an eye.

"Beiwe says she likes thy thatch, Gormglaith!"

Gormglaith smiled down at the tangle haired moppet.

"Thanks Beiwe, I like thine, too!"

"I'm an e53l39bn4."

"Th'art Beiwe," said Gwenhwyfer, smiling.

"Yeah, I'm Beiwe. I'm five..." she sighed wearily, holding out a splayed hand, then looked up sharply at Gormglaith.

"Who *art* thou, anyway?"

So they rambled, Gormglaith and Beiwe gabbing about the *Loch faerie and pillywiggin book* then *Tales of the knotty kindel* as they reached a thorpe of alcoved, limestone buildings with brightly hued windows, pitched roofs of dark green tile and garden showers of shoots, daisies and tall grass halting against misty stands of soaring pines.

"My kynn Flann was brought in here," said Gormglaith as hundreds of shimmering black and pumpkin butterflies fluttered between them, swirled like a cloud, then sailed on.

"I've heard she's sly!" Bairrfhionn answered at last with her lop-sided grin.

They came to a leafy cluster of shops, one with glowing argon blue runes spelling *Fjorgyn's fizz*, a maedchen haunt like the Soohed in Elmthorpe. At the *Klutch*, runed as such in ruddy pumpkin neon, scollagyn and shees sipped coffee under pine blue green umbrellas flapping in the wind. Nigh was a lifelike (and sized) hard white clunch carving of a scollagyn with a swatch of short hair by shaved sides, holding a bundle of flax sheaves and looking wistfully over the water at a gathering haze. The linens and klompen looked like what Blairies still wore and by the runes on its staddle below, had been put there 857 years before.

"Who is she?" asked Gormglaith.

"Glynnis Hafgan Banning," said Gwenhwyfer, "Blairie witch, went on to Woolf house in Fen Glioon, then Snotra and afterwards taught here for her last fifty years."

"I should have known... by the hair."

"Hafgan..." sighed Gwenhwyfer, glancing from carving to clannin girl.

"Not shenn," said Gormglaith, "but kin..."

"Lucky girl, Beiwe!" Feegan put with a snicker. "I'm gonna help thee swot before supper. It was spooks meeting thee Gormglaith. I hope I see thee again!"

"I hope so too!"

"How thrilling," said Beiwe. "...bye Gormglaith. Thanks for talking to me about *Tales of the knotty kindel*."

Feegan's right arm was pulled taut as the moppet towed her off.

So they lingered near Glynnis. Four scollagyn sat on a bench close to shore, swotting with goblins as a knot of maedchen slunk from Fjorgyn's, staring hard at Gormglaith and the Sparkenbanes who themselves gazed after three scollagyn playfully tripping along the foggy bank path, arms swinging hand in hand.

"So Feegan's pledging Wrath ness?" Gormglaith asked Bairrfhionn.

"She's carrying over!"

"She's chilling."

"We met her at a Lughnasadh feish at Woolf house in Fen Glioon, where she's done four summers. She flew away more than once," Bairrfhionn said, smirking, "but that's Feegan."

"Yes it is," came a crackling answer.

Gormglaith wheeled to see a skinny girl with chiseled cheekbones, alit purple eyes and wide pushed up nose bearing a gleaming platinum ring over ash blackened lips, white and pumpkin freaked hair floating in static about a trim straight waist loosely sheathed in Blairie's handy longstockings.

"Thou'rt Gormglaith!" she said, putting forth a skeletal hand which peeked from open white armgloves. "I've met thy kin Gweneth, my bat. A sly maegden! Perhaps we can loom a bit of *heed* into her too! Hi. I'm Blaaid Raine-Blairie."

"Th'art Blaaid?!" answered Gormglaith, flummoxed. "I've heard so much about thee! I'm thrilled... I mean..."

"Codswallop!" said Blaaid, waving an arm. "We've never met so how couldst thou know a thing about me but I'm flattered anyway. Hi Gwenhwyfer Bloor... Bairrfhionn *Sparkenbane*! My 272nd birthday eve is Winterfyllith 30th, the night before Samhain and thou and I are twined for one flurt in the midnight dreary at Fleet's in Albans Firth, with all the trimmings! As it happens, I'll be in town."

"Ok, Blaaid!"

"See thee then! Later, y'all!"

The witch walked briskly down the bank path where a flock of scollagyn overwhelmed her, giggling and gabbing.

"Blaaid taught my Flann," said Gormglaith. "Her sway."

"I had her ten moons," Bairrfhionn answered, nodding, "for scrud freayll, before I went to Wrath ness. I still haunt her, like when I need a quick, trusty hit of root!"

They were strolling beneath low, broken clouds when Gwenhwyfer took many steps ahead, twirled and skipped backwards with a grin and glimmering, deeply sunken eyes. She spun once, hair flying, then held her wan right hand straight armed to Gormglaith.

"Oh Gormglaith please hold hands," she beseeched. "I've had so much fun today, let's hold hands so the three of us can walk back in crushes and not forget."

Gormglaith smiled shyly, giving her open hands to the banshees of Wrath ness as the three of them walked along the lochside path into a patch of fog billowing off the water.

The western sky had gone pumpkin-red when they reached Glas knoll. A wailing wind came up as pines and birches answered in surging rustles and rushes. Gwenhwyfer stared at the lapping loch, smirked, dropped her cutty sark on the grass, stepped out of raw wooden klompen and still in black longstockings, waded into the dark water. Thigh deep she ruddled about to face them, threw herself backwards and shouted from within a sparkling splash,

"Way! *Why* are y'all so parchy?"

"No way am I going in," said Bairrfhionn, watching with head tilted, "unless thou dost."

Glancing at Bairrfhionn with a wide grin, Gormglaith peeled off her cutty sark, stepped out of the still sawdusty klompen and lankily bounded in. The three were soon dunking and splashing in the crisp water. Six fat goldfish swam floppily between them as the pumpkin-red dusk played off black light shifting scales.

"They do that," said Bairrfhionn, steeped to chalken shoulders, "since girls here feed them, which some say they shouldn't do..."

"Looky," said Gwenhwyfer, sunken eyes so bright, nose ring glittering, holding out her hands as a plump red one with white and black dapples swam into them. Meanwhile a grey loon hooted pleas nearby. With a caspery glance Gwenhwyfer spun in the water and so they all floated, wafting on their backs, hair wet and limp, to watch stars come out amid streaks of fast flowing clouds. Howling wind raked the trees as cackles of thunder brought a quick chill to the air and the swans hovered nigh in a saffron light.

"Wraithen," sighed Gormglaith.

They ran into Glas knoll shivering and giggling. Rinsed and in dry linen, damp locks combed and lank, drinks from the kitchen in hand, they plopped down on the big settle. Gwenhwyfer folded up with legs drawn to chest and closed her eyes. Bairrfhionn lifted an eyebrow and gazed at Gormglaith.

"I happen to know Grendels don't wontedly do Ben chee inns, never mind you Hafgan Halsens. Was it merry? ...Or so *too*?"

"A kick. I like the ben chee... Gogan. She's lekker."

"Gogan and I go way back," said Bairrfhionn, glancing out at the loch now in a blue grey light.

"Thought so! Didst tha meet her there?"

"Yeah, I've known her since I was a maedchen! My kynn still hang out there rather a lot. Gogan must be in her early hundreds now but I've never asked... she nests with a bunch of other shees, ben chees, over by Coo rood. She's a flirt but has a spooky heart... and reads me like a book by the bye. I've never gotten over that crush and stumble hopelessly with every word I say to her."

"Is she wanton?"

"Not much. She likes being amidst enthralling girls, is all. *Lots* of enthralling girls," Bairrfhionn put with a smirk, waving her hand.

Gwenhwyfer stirred dreamily.

"What are we talking about?"

"Gogan."

"Oh," Gwenhwyfer sighed sleepily, eyes still closed, "Gogan likes ben cheein', Gormglaith..."

Gormglaith watched Bairrfhionn's hair shimmer maple red with freaks of crimson and pumpkin in the twilight.

"I should haunt my kynn and put a heart on the blip," she said.

"There's something I think I should tell thee first."

"What?"

"My name. Bairrfhionn Pane Aghadreen of the Greens Sparkenbane."

Bairrfhionn nodded as Gormglaith gaped back with wide eyes.

"Findabair Pane and I... are twain."

"...Bloody flurt."

"Thou see'st, we both carry all the tides of our affiae shenn, Aghadreen of the Greens. We've got her thread, but twained with sundry bundlings from the shy and hooky braids so neither of us is way alike to her, nor to each other. I've never met Findabair, there're three dozen of us flitting about the world and I don't think she's heard one's a banshee... yet."

Bairrfhionn played her hands with an open, grabsome stare.

"...n here I thought tha heldst back on letting slip thy kynn clannin name because thou'rt a banshee," Gormglaith said at last.

"Anyone want popcorn?" Gwenhwyfer asked, stirring beneath lank damp hair.

She got up without waiting for an answer and headed for the kitchen. Gormglaith watched her walk on sturdy toes in black, footed longstockings.

"I have to slash..." said Bairrfhionn, leaping up and dashing off the other way, glancing back to flash a toothy grin.

Gormglaith looked forward and frowned at the now moonlit loch of Blairie wood.

Gwenhwyfer called up a song braid, the kind that throbs and weaves without end. Hidden blue and green spots came on, lighting the walls as she made all the noises of popping parched corn kernels by hand. When the banshee came back with a brimming stainless steel bowl, Gormglaith was folded up fast asleep.

She awoke sprawled on the settle in a hush of scattered blue green light. Bairrfhionn and Gwenhwyfer were littered on each other nearby. Gwenhwyfer's face had a sharp look half hidden by yellow hair, starkly dreaming. Bairrfhionn's head was thrown back on her clannin sister's shoulder, long red locks flowing in flat plaits upon them both. Her mouth was open in a loopy, nearly thrilled smile, breathing evenly and with a little wooshing.

Gormglaith stood, got her bearings and headed for the bath, walking on her toes. Tight light beams came on within cool black spinel stone walls as she faced the looking glass. Her hair was a tangle, the new Glen pelyn longstockings rumpled. She looked down at her legs in snuggish white linen, bones and thews of shins, knees, thighs, pelvis and the upended gore shaped mound between, the dimple of her navel and beetling slats of her ribs. She shook her straw thatch. She went to the sinks, found a tooth scrubber, let it wander and foam in her mouth with the wonted taste of natron and myrrh, then splashed her face. She had another look, arms loose at her sides. Tossing her head she walked off.

Back in the gather lair she found Gwenhwyfer and Bairrfhionn as she'd left them, limbs and bodies fallen together like knackered wraiths. Gormglaith stared at Bairrfhionn then loped, glid and skipped across slippery black spinel stone to the scrubbed titanium kitchen which lit up with baffled white light. She tickled a few brightly hued goblins, idly flicked through the help tales, then knit her brow and glanced about, sniffing.

With a low beep and taut *cathlunc* an oversized chalken dish slid out bearing hollow elbow noodyls smothered in thick pumpkin hued cheese along with a big blue cornflower. Next a frothy tumbler of black dewberry glid forth. Taking these to the board she settled whist onto the hard but snug pink quartz bench to snack. After smelling and eyeing the dewberry, she drank, then pulled *Eachdraidh* from satchel, set it on the board with a thump and began to read. She got up once to pull a ginger crush from the tap.

The harvest moon waxed nearly full upon the elder gleam of a trillion stars as Gormglaith stood at the weftishly paned window in a kindling light, head tilted, gazing across the flustered loch whilst birches swayed and pines bowed in a ripping wind. She reeled about to see Gwenhwyfer still swathed in sleep by the blue green glow and Bairrfhionn's wisp of a freckled, lopsided smile, her left hand beckoning from a moonbeam as Gormglaith slid into a sleepy tangle with black linen longstockings, flat locks of red hair and the sundry smells of girls, settles, tapestries and heedfully kept crofts.

wraithen as fuck

Gormglaith cracked an eye by a slit, then the other. It was sun storming and cloudless outside as hot yellow beams streamed into the gather lair. Her eyes snapped shut then slowly opened again.

She sat up on the settle with a start, alone. Beyond the windows a dark blue green loch rippled as leafy trees and pines swayed in the wind but the only sound was a far off, steady rush of air. She sighed and blew a lock of stray thatch, hiking the Glen pelyn wrap up to her nipples as she padded to the supper cove and peered into the kitchen which was sleek, cool and empty, then peeked in the woodsy nest too, its zoisite rune strip shimmering a deep ice blue but with nobody there to stare at it.

Crossing Glas knoll Gormglaith walked through shafts of harsh sunlight. She was still some way from the corner nest when, keeping stride, she tilted her head, having spotted Bairrfhionn flat on her back in flued black longstockings, chalken chest beaming hard, crimson hair

streaming forth with arms thrown out and hands loosely open. Between her lanky thighs knelt Gwenhwyfer like a wraith in white, cheeks throbbing as if to heartbeats. Sunbeams blew through the corner wrapped window into sheer skin throwing back shifted black light from blue green veins, setting locks to glimmers and making linens glow. The maegden from Elmothorpe leaned against the opening as Bairrfhionn gazed up at her from a fynn and freckled face with searing popinjay green eyes.

Gormglaith yawned her head, dripping with tears. Outside the swans circled and dipped slowly. Rising on her toes she came to the staddle and lowered herself through a thrillsome, stirring smell of slattag ghlass and cairmeal, falling on her side an arm's length from them, head flat in blue black cotton, right hand dug between her thighs, fingers threading into cleft, close linen betwixt, to stare through deep blue lake eyes.

The sun was high when Gormglaith's eyes flung open, gawking into yellow, white freaked hair and the closely shaved back of Gwenhwyfer's upper neck and lower head. The banshee clung to slumbering Bairrfhionn whose mouth was open in a loopy smile. Gormglaith scrunched in, laying loosely balled hands between the stark blades of Gwenhwyfer Bloor's back.

Soon after, Bairrfhionn stood over them saying, "Ok sleepyheads, anyone who gets up'll find hot chocolate, scones and rowanberry to drink! Anyone who doesn't will miss me dishin' 'em!"

Bairrfhionn's eyes went blank as she nimbly rundled about and walked off on her toes in the girl-like but somehow all too heedful and smooth gait of a house robot, or a wraith.

Gwenhwyfer spun over, cast a shy grin and lightly rapped Gormglaith's shoulders with closed fists. Gormglaith broke open a smile as the banshee looked off to the side then straight into her eyes.

"Ok, she's gone wraithen again."

Gormglaith smirked and nodded as Gwenhwyfer put forefinger to mouth in a hush and whispered. The banshee held up three fingers... two... one...

They bounded off the staddle and tore out of the nest screaming, making a swath for Bairrfhionn who whirled and shrieked as the two maegden in white wrapped about her at the waist. They all slid two yards across the slippery stone deck on flat linen clad feet, laughing.

"I'm gonna slash, my bats," said Gwenhwyfer as she made a snapping, hair flying spin and quickly tiptoed away leaving Gormglaith red faced, beaming and breathing hard.

"So Gormglaith!" said Bairrfhionn through a chalky scythe. "Will it be chocolate or coffee...?"

At the board Bairrfhionn poured her a mug of chocolate. Near the *Eachdraidh* was a dark green and flax bowl heaped with fresh scones, bounded by earthenware mugs bearing butter, boxberry and blackberry jams along with tumblers of foamy, ruddy rowanberry.

Bairrfhionn sat down beside her with a frothing mug of coffee, scanned the board and said, "Bit of a binge then..."

She bit craven into a scone, flakes tumbling as Gwenhwyfer breezed back to alight on the other bench, chin in hands, brims bright pink in scattered daylight between wan and reedy arms. Bairrfhionn rose and with red hair flying about the waist, fetched her clannin sister a mug of coffee, then settled back in to gnaw another scone buried in butter and blackberry jam as Gormglaith squinted at the sunlit loch and Gwenhwyfer eyed them both.

Gormglaith cast her eyes up with a simper and ran off.

She sat down again to hushed gazes, snatched a scone and cheerfully asked, "So, what've y'all been saying behind my back?"

She buttered and jammed the scone and shoved it into her mouth, munchily watching them. Bairrfhionn lunged and gave her a smunching kiss on the cheek to which Gormglaith let out an ear stabbing shriek, sent the scone flying and gaped at Bairrfhionn with a strained smile as the banshee quickly went about buttering another for her.

Gwenhwyfer twirled her eyes.

"Pane... Pane... Pane... " she sighed, shaking her head.

Tears slipping down her cheeks, Gormglaith lit off to the big settle, plopped down, drew up her legs and rocked wombishly back and forth, sniffing, damp eyes lasering the loch. Bairrfhionn, with maple red hair draped forward, dropped head in hands and wept.

Gwenhwyfer stared at Gormglaith, then the banshee, then what was left of breakfast and said,

"Whatever... whilst this bloody crush splatters into weepy puddles I think I'll do something meed..."

Gwenhwyfer was dabbling crumbs, Bairrfhionn racked and sulking, when Gormglaith skipped over, looked down at them with ruddy, puffy eyes and said,

"Ok, let's go see the swans."

"I'll have a bash!" Gwenhwyfer put brightly.

Gaggles flew between flock and fleet as hands were nibbled, beaks petted and so on. Bairrfhionn was sitting on bighty klompen heels gabbing with a speechy, stalwart guilbneach when Gormglaith rose up in the green henge shade, hands on her hips.

"Bairrfhionn Pane I'm so too nettled by the notion not one of my kin knows about thee banshee or not."

Bairrfhionn cringed, closed her eyes then stood and faced her.

"Shall I be ever so stark?" she answered.

"Flann told me there'd be no frolic at the feish," said Gormglaith. "For starters all I've likely done so far has been to send my friend and thy twain Findabair Pane off on a tide of tears over this wanton little bamf of mine into the outskirts of *Eachdraidh*. Aside from that, whatever I do now'll forever blow my puff as the affiae were wont to say and speaking of shenn I'd be amazed if the steady titanium hand of mine own Grainne Grendel hasn't been tweedling about somewhere in all this. Geileis spilled more than enough for me to grok that the other night but being such a clueless bumpkin it took us more than a tick so yes Bairrfhionn, a bit of *ever so stark* would help, one way or another."

"Thou wast there. Thou heardst."

"What."

"Gormglaith?! When I told Geileis about the wheat freayll! I mean, '*Green greens everywhere*'...?"

"Not enough! She likes green! We both do. Besides, maybe my Flann can outspin your crummy plait."

"Don't be such a goop! When I told Grainne the same thing two nights ago she read me a streak, I can tell thee," said the banshee, putting hands on rail hips. "'Bairrfhionn Pane thou behave'st like thy twain, blinded by the starlight of old gab. Get a grip!'"

Gormglaith leaned forward, her mouth frozen open, straw thatch fluttering in the breeze.

"The harvest moon's full tonight."

Bairrfhionn barely nodded.

"I'll plight with the falling sun then."

She tumbled into four arms, tears running.

Back in Glas knoll they settled at the now empty board, each red eyed and sniffing. Gwenhwyfer raised an eyebrow at Gormglaith, said "Haunt Morigan?" and glommed onto the loch with sunken eyes.

"Creiddylad! Gwenhwyfer. Hey! How art thou, my bat. Fit! I'm fettle! Bairrfhionn says hi... Hey kinsikins! How'rt tha doing? Wow! I guess Fall's comin'! So hark, the three of us were outside chatting up the swans and it was thrilling. Yeah, anyway we got to talking, uhm, truth be told Gormglaith and Bairrfhionn did most of it and I know this is a bit rash but Gormglaith wants to plight with the falling sun, I mean like... tonight. Gormglaith? She's nodding! ...Ok, I think she is but I'll ask... Art thou bent? Aye, she's bent. Ok! Hey Gormglaith, wanna to talk to Morigan?"

Gormglaith shook her head wildly, waving hands and mouthing, *No way! ...No!*

"Ha! Sorry, she doesn't want to talk to thee! Heh heh. Thou dost?! Ok... 'k... yeah! I'll ask her... that's dreamy! ...'k! Bye!"

Gwenhwyfer drew a breath.

"As it happens, they're havin' a walk through Loch henge gardens in Fen Glioon, so Morigan thought we might meet there before sunset."

"Ok..."

"We can all get together in one of those fetching little flurt lairs nearby! Then at falling sun we'll go into the henge."

Gormglaith knitted her brow.

"There'll be witnesses. I mean, not only Sparkenbanes."

Gwenhwyfer nodded battishly.

"Gwenhwyfer Sparkenbane it's been at least two thousand years since a banshee plighted at Loch henge."

"I think the last," said Bairrfhionn, "was Korrigan Coe of the Fields, 2127 years ago."

Gormglaith cast Bairrfhionn a startled glance.

"Hey, don't look at me! It's not like I'm the thorpe cabbage or anything," she said with a toothy grin. "Rathyen brought it up a few nights ago."

Gormglaith gazed back.

"I glark there's like, some grim stir to this..."

The banshees of Wrath ness nodded their heads as one, like mop-pets.

"...and you can't tell me what it is."

They shook them, hair swishing.

"...With the falling sun then."

"If thou haunst thy kynn now," said beaming Gwenhwyfer, "they'll have enough time to meet us in Fen Gloom!"

"I don't want to haunt my kynn."

Gwenhwyfer blinked at her, gobsmacked.

"Bu..."

"Grok," said Bairrfhionn, unfeazed.

"O ...k," said Gwenhwyfer, "now that the wee bits've been taken care of, we've still got a few ticks left for the true pith of why we're here... fox and goose!"

They sought ginger crushes and coffee in the kitchen then settled back at the board.

"I don't know how to play this..." Gormglaith said singsong as she shifted her long limbs, staring at a ghosted flock of white geese hovering warily away from two foxes, one red, the other pumpkin hued.

"We'll show thee!" answered Bairrfhionn, smiling lopsidedly. "Thou'lt be the geese!"

Soon giggles mingled with traded bait as geese flapped madly about, foxes lurking and slinking to and fro. After awhile the foxes became hemmed in by a now settled flock and fled. The banshees cast steady stares at Gormglaith.

"What."

"Thou wonst," answered Gwenhwyfer.

Gormglaith wrinkled her nose.

"Not. I suck at this."

"Dost tha see any foxes still lurkin' about?" she asked as a goose flapped its wings and honked at Gormglaith.

"Oh come on, y'all *let* me win!"

"Trust me, Gormglaith," Bairrfhionn put with a grin, "nobody in this clannin lets *anyone* win at fox 'n goose."

"It was jammy then," said Gormglaith, taking a swallow of ginger crush.

Meanwhile Gwenhwyfer slid a linen swatch in front of her.

"It's from Gillian. I haven't read it. Anyway I'm off for a bath!"

A pumpkin and green goblin flew up from the swatch, spitting runes.

Haethwyck by Grasp, Wrath ness 14 Halegmonath 5494

Gormglaith Grendel Hafgan Halsen of Elmthorpe Glas knoll,
Blairie, the West meads

Dear Gormglaith,

We've all heard such shivering things about thee! I hope we meet soon!

Since th'art not shee thy banshee plight would braid with a pledge at Wrath ness teach. I've put in a flyer, also some rag from the Grasp fettle, tra la.

Gillian Goblyn Sparkenbane

By the bye I wrote this before we knew **anything** so

Bairrfhionn and Gwenhwyfer could give it to thee whenever. I hope thou dostn't mind?

Ok. After I get word thou'st seen this I may be in **zombie nail biting stitches** Gormglaith until I hear.

I haven't bitten my nails since I was sixteen. Not much, anyway. Heh heh.

"Hey Bairrfhionn, is this the same Gillian Goblyn who..."

"The same."

"What's she doing in a teach?"

"Along with bein' a banshee? She keeps busy with Tegan and Rathyen, helpin' scollies learn how to think."

"Hmph! I always liked her in *Tales of the knotty kindel*... So what dost *thou* do, anyway?"

"Tha meanst when I'm not flirtin' with ben chees? I guess if it has to do with keeps I might hear about it."

"Thou'rt a freayll witch. I knew that somehow."

Bairrfhionn made a toothy grin, shrugging her shoulders.

Gormglaith's eyebrows knitted.

"Gwenhwyfer."

"Morfyd and Morigan's close kin, neach. Two of her kynn are Frisian. She grew up in Lyden, hence the frizzy ways. She's like the utter nest brat and can keep anything hush. We all think she knows skeins and if thou tellst her something it'll never come back so she hears everything in any nest."

"That's *it*?"

"She's rather keen at bowling too."

Bairrfhionn lifted her palms with a wry smile. Gormglaith grinned as she looked back at the goblin hovering above its linen swatch.

"Cheers from Grasp, Wrath ness!" she read aloud. "Art thou thinking about clannin banns..."

"I think I'll have a bath myself," said Bairrfhionn. "See thee!"

Gormglaith glanced up as the banshee strode off across black spinel stone, then read, raised her eyebrows, jumped back and forth, frowned, shrugged, sighed and flicked an eye at the next item.

It began with a loop, the shrunken ghosts of three girls clattering noisily towards her, their sundry cutty sarks, longstockings and clunky wooden klompen all thoroughly black. Next they skipped and slouched in a row with hard looks. This was the latest throw of *Yah!* She wandered about, right hand squashed between her thighs.



Yah! | clattering noisily towards her

The last flyer was called *Wrath ness teach* and started with a few scollagyn clothed wholly alike in bane white linens, walking steadfastly together against blasts of blustery gales through a barren close between barrowish low bluestone walls. With right hand evermore squeezed into her lap Gormglaith eagerly got lost among casts of keen maegden at bone boards, of sleek and tidy swot dens and nest lairs, a seaside football match under murky skies, then half a dozen scollagyn sitting on a grassy cliff overlooking the cold blue waters and white-topped waves of the Minch off Wrath ness. Here they bantered with a sly looking witch, all the while munching butties from baskets woven of ash splits.

The wind blew hard through leafy green trees as she stared out the windows, watching a flock of birds upend, dip and rise in a looping, twisting throng over the loch.

Gwenhwyfer was at a looking glass drying her hair whilst Bairrfhionn splashed in a sunken pool.

"Hey Gormglaith!" greeted Gwenhwyfer from beneath a huge towel. "How'dst thou like the rag?"

"Hi!" she said, looking about. "The flyer for Wrath ness was canny fit! The new *Yah!* was fun but I've not a clue what she had in mind throwin' *that* in, it's only ever trigger stuff."

Gwenhwyfer smirked.

"Want a bath?" asked Bairrfhionn, leaning forward.

"Like a duck."

Bairrfhionn clambered out of the glowing pool, nudged squeaking goblins on the floor with her toes and sprinted for the shower bay, leaving a sparkling trail of water behind. Gormglaith gazed at Gwenhwyfer through the looking glass as the banshee groomed her hair with quick strokes of an open tined silver mane comb.

"So Gwenhwyfer what'dst *thou* think of that fettle rag, I mean, when tha plighted?"

"I thought it was... " said Gwenhwyfer between strokes, "boring!"

Gormglaith peeled her longstockings, threw them on a fat, scrubbed stainless steel sleeve and stepped into bright, steamy froth, eyes squishing shut as she settled her bottom against the hard flat stone below. Bairrfhionn padded over, running long fingers through her wet hair.

"Lucky girl, Gormglaith! I'm gonna wash thy thatch!"

Bairrfhionn haunched lankily behind her on dry slate, wetted down straw thatch and kneaded blue shampoo as Gormglaith closed her eyes, adrift. Later she dunked her head, came up sputtering and gasping for air, rubbed eyes and face, then shut her eyes again and steeped.

She opened them as Gwenhwyfer walked to a black granite bench slab and straddled it, limbs evenly spread, bottom thrown back on smooth stone as Bairrfhionn sat crosswise. They scooted forward knees to knees until their ringed noses were a foot afar. Putting hands between her thighs Bairrfhionn gripped the edges of the bench as Gwenhwyfer took slight locks of red hair to twist and plait. Soon three thin braids fell down Bairrfhionn's neck to her shoulder and Gwenhwyfer banded each towards the end with tight windings of many hued strings and thread.

Gormglaith brooded.

"Hey y'all?" she called, leaning forward in the sunken pool's shimmering, bending light.

"Yes Gormglaith?" sang the banshees.

"I forgot to say, I don't want to see Morigan beforehand."

They gaped as she closed her eyes and sank back into the glowing froth.

"That's stern," said Bairrfhionn.

A bit later Gormglaith straddled the bench, Gwenhwyfer crosswise, their thighs spread with bony knees rubbing as the banshee warded a forefinger upon Gormglaith's lips and blackened them with ash dust.

"Have a glom..." sighed Gwenhwyfer, leaning back.

"Wraithen as fuck."

loch henge

A glittering silvery skate crossed the Running over a spare span, gathering speed to leave Kin Dails and the dappled hills of West meads behind. From its cool, breezy lair Gormglaith and the banshees gazed

upon trundling leas. Some were harvested, more were fallow gwaens filled with white and yellow gowans in tall grasses gone to seed, others had crops yet overflowing, soon to be scythed or pulled, their wavy rows of wheat, flax, soy, barley and rye strobing by atop frothy black soils. This grew most of the talk and whilst Bairrfhionn was thrallishly sly, Gwenhwyfer steered elsewhere.

Farms gave way to steep and thickly wooded dales. After winding and climbing into the Running alps the skate made a short stop by the wide eaved, grey granite houses and fluttering dark blue, yellow-slashed banners of Fetchingkeep, clinging steadfastly to the mountainside by an ever more tumbling Running river. Then they skirted upstream to slip through the Wealden fold, its sheer layered stone close at either side before dropping away as the skate whisked onto the high green Glioon meads set in a ring of snow topped peaks and sped by garden houses, some five levels high with sundry shops on shaded walks beneath yawning boughs of elm and yew, linden and pine, at last darting among the skeinishly wafered high rises and high shift eight upon reels of Fen Glioon.

Near the thick of town the skate glid into a maze of halls betwixt puzzled stonecraft walls, water sprays and laser beams. Gormglaith and the banshees clopped a short way with a sparse flock to a tram of rubbed titanium which slid through a bustling shop lane, then a boughsome byway, halting thrice at three tidy stops called,

Woolf house

Riding rood

Loch henge

Here they got off on a leafy, shoreside garden walk not far north of where the Running poured forth from misty blue loch Glioon. Gormglaith drew her breath at the sight of Loch henge set in green ash groves, its flat roof of skeinishly braided metals, clunches and sheer corundums of many hues floating inside a ring thirty-three yards across, twenty-eight slabs of starry, white flecked bluestone each almost seven feet wide, half as much deep and more than four yards high with cunningly latticed windows a yard's breadth set back between them.

Coming to the henge lios with its inns and flurt lairs, Bairrfhionn and Gormglaith went through brightly paned doors as Gwenhwyfer walked on towards the henge.

They took a sleek nest looking on the bluestone henge by the lake's grassy western shore under rundling clouds as the snowy pike of Galadbane lurked in the Alps far to the south. Gormglaith sprawled on the staddle, leaning back against an inlaid headboard, sunken eyes glimmering behind thatch askew, lankily sheathed in rumpled and rimped white longstockings, left leg folded to flat chest, the other thrown flush across the bolster. The nest smelled of apples and vinegar and nearby was a bowl of whole dried northern spies and scones, tokens of Harvest home. The grey cloth bound *Eachdraidh* was open on her thigh when Bairrfhionn greeted Gwenhwyfer and the others with a lopsided grin.

"Gormglaith, meet Tegan Nichneven!" said Gwenhwyfer.

"...I'm thrilled," said a tall girl with frosty grey eyes and long, geal yellow hair, the sides and back of her head shaved close like some teach witch of yore. Stepping up in black linens she cast a racking gaze whilst putting forth a gangling and blue veined hand.

Gormglaith smiled, clambered across the staddle on all fours and stood to take it.

"How spooks! Geileis says she knew thee at Rand house!"

"We shared some boards!"

Gwenhwyfer warded at a wispy maegden with deep set green eyes and wan hair tumbling to her hips.

"Creiddyladl Trendel..."

This one seemed shy, nose ring glittering in the afternoon gleam.

"Hey Gormglaith," she said, arms at her sides.

"Hi Creiddyladl!"

Gwenhwyfer next swept her right hand towards a girl with chin length flaxen hair freaked with red, a maegden about Gormglaith's height, clad alikely to her and Creiddyladl in white Glen pelyn longstockings. Periwinkle blue eyes lit up above a glowing platinum nose ring which topped off a brattish smile.

"...and Raoghnailt Raine-Blairie Sparkenbane," said Gwenhwyfer, grinning wide.

"Hi," said Raoghnailt, staring.

"Hi!" answered Gormglaith, staring back.

"They're meant to be the daisy maegden...!" put Gwenhwyfer. "I mean if that's ok."

"Aye!" said Gormglaith with a quick nod, her eyes glomming fast onto Raohnailt. "Ok! ...Ta!"

Nudging gab followed, mostly about Glas knoll, the trip to Fen Glioon and so on. Tegan, Gwenhwyfer, Raohnailt and Creiddyladl soon left to meet Morigan who was said to be waiting in a flurt lair nearby. As they crossed through the doorway Gormglaith watched the two scollagyn's neachly linen sheathed, maedchen bottoms sway below short wan cutty sarks.

One spun her head to glance back for the fleeting glimpse of a shrewd blue lake eye peering from behind straw thatch. Raohnailt Sparkenbane flashed a witchy grin.

"So... what happens now?" asked Gormglaith, wheeling to Bairrfhionn.

"I haven't a clue," said the banshee, pulling a shorter black cutty sark from a trip bag.

"Hey Bairrfhionn?" she asked, crawling back to the headboard.

"Hey *what*fhionn?" Bairrfhionn sang out, slipping her right arm into a linen sleeve.

"Thou remind'st me of Findabair..." Gormglaith sang back.

"So too...?" asked Bairrfhionn, grinning as she wriggled her left arm into the other.

"I mean, I may be in a stitch."

"Gasping! So am I!"

Bairrfhionn stood tall, sheeish and twig, as if she were now somehow mostly legs yearning utmost upon blond klompen, black longstockings soaring high to scammeled flat feldstone chest whilst slender braids and locks dove to scaanish thighs.

"Anyway I hear rather *craven* crush can get kindled in a stitch!" she said.

Gormglaith brooded at her own outstretched legs in rumpled linens.

"Gormglaith?!" called Bairrfhionn, shaking her head.

"Truth be told I can ask Morigan anything I please."

"...Yeah, but it's dodgy. Thou knowst... *Short 'n sweet's the call that's meed!*"

"I know. A quick 'yes' and I've got you, spot on where you want me. Morigan won't flee," she put with a flippy shrug.

"No, she won't."

Leaning against the headboard, legs splayed, Gormglaith watched Loch henge under a blue sky spackled with scuttering, puffy clouds and spotted a black pond where white swans circled lazily, now and then beating their wings near tall grasses billowing in the wind.

"...Free by her I weave with Wyrd through meads and hills and lochs, nigh thine I stitch my knots upon this haunted string..."

Bairrfhionn kneeled stickishly on the staddle, maple red hair sweeping forward across shining popinjay eyes and a wraithen smile, then ruffled Gormglaith's straw thatch to tangles.

"Thorpe cabbage!"

Giggling, they gazed out the window and grew hush as the swans slowly cast their rings, nodding beaks, nudging wind ripples on the pond.

Leaving the lios Bairrfhionn and Gormglaith went among light flocks down a treesome path to the henge, rambling by a life sized carving in gold of Erin Sparkenbane, an early Celtic freayll witch.



Erin | carving in gold

As they crossed into the henge's deep and chilling afternoon shadow Gormglaith's thatch was caught by a gust of wind and she didn't try to tame it. With *Eachdraidh* under arm she looked up through strawsome hair blowing across her face to read runes lasered into the bluestone.

we live in clannin

Inside an echoing low lobby they stopped at a new cast of *Caoilfhionn and Rathnait*, crafted with many-hued layers of blended glass leaf floated between two sheer ash ice wafers, giving a bewitchingly strong notion of depth. This was stirred by the widely known clannin tale, showing ginger haired Caoilfhionn from the back wearing an ealden kind of dark blue grey longstockings as she stood between the white linen clad thighs of red thatched and swollen bellied Rathnait whose lips were blackened for plight, the Running river's high banks north of Kin Dails behind them.



Caoilfhionn and Rathnait | a new cast

Gormglaithe peered out onto the nearly empty henge's sweeping floor with its knotty Celtic inlays. A plighting was underway with three naked maegden calling back and forth from the *Oardagh of Caoilfhionn and Rathnait*.

After going down a short and narrow flight of blue slate steps followed by an alikened hallway they found a door with the name *Hafgan Halsen* glowing in sky blue shifted from black light above. The snowy plight lair within had a latticed window looking across the black pool with its white swans. To one side was a lasered granite bench by an inset ledge with platinum water taps and an ash split basket of dried fruit. Nearby on this wall was a small red heart set in flakes of crimson

corundum and crosswise was a gore, an upended, three cornered slice of feldstone lightly veined in blue green.



Gormglaith gave Bairrfhionn a wan smile, stepped from alder wood klompen, hooked thumbs under the wide, pleated wrap, shimmied out of her longstockings and put them aside. She sat stark on the bench, book close by, knees together, feet afar, leaning forward and looked up at Bairrfhionn from behind a fallen lock of thatch.

"This being a henge with no looking glass in sight," said the banshee, "I can comb thy hair..."

Gormglaith cast a maedchen grin.

"Not!"

Bairrfhionn lit down beside her, put limbs likewise and together they looked out the window, watching the swans.

The clannin girl from Elmthorpe stood at the runed western opening into Loch henge. Glancing back at Bairrfhionn who gave her a lopsided smile Gormglaith stared straight ahead and strode naked into the *Each-draidh nan fylgjie*.

The late afternoon sun sent hundreds of many hued beams through the roof's corundum panes as she padded across granite and underlit quartz. Bairrfhionn's klompen echoed loudly behind her. More than three hundred girls stirred two or three deep beside the latticed windows and when she reached the middle every gaze had settled upon her. Bairrfhionn took a few long strides to the side as Gormglaith looked into gnawsome stares of first sight. A gaggle of five moppets giggled and waved which got them a shy wave from the hip along with a flashed grin and these cast their own spells about the ring.

Gwenhwyfer breezed in crossways from the henge's eastern opening, Frisian klompen clapping. Standing by Bairrfhionn she leaned forward to look beholdingly at Gormglaith. Then Tegan came through the same way drawing eager shrieks which seemed to startle Gormglaith as the witch walked noisily and lankily towards them, a hint of smirk on her face.

Applause and screams came anew when Morigan followed at last, walking stark in a smooth and dashing gait, glancing to and fro, throwing smiles at sundry onlookers. Bringing up the rear as daisy maegden, but rather more with the look of sly maedchen fylgic reeler, were Raognnailt and Creiddyladl in chalken Glen pelyn longstockings reaching over ribs clutching like clarsachs up to bare chests. Each held four leafy green-stemmed, pumpkin-red daisies which they tossed all at once before Gormglaith's bare feet. The scollagyn dashed off to the side as Morigan stopped two yards from the maegden to face her in a bewitching light. Gormglaith gaped down at the daisies then sharply lifted her chin, eyes gone wild.

Whilst sharing the telling kinship with Erin's stern carving, Morigan stood in a waggish slouch, taut thews across arms, legs and tummy glowing chalkenly and shot through with blue green veins, her raw honey blond hair falling in rantish, twining plaits to beetling clavicles. She bore broadly put, sparkling minch blue eyes on a face cast by soaring cheekbones over sunken hollows and a slabbish jaw, her long nose bearing a platinum ring looped above dark and harshly blackened lips.

Like braids on a loom Creiddyladl and Raognnailt entwined arms then, to oohs and ahs boosted by the henge's light echo, the daisy girls swapped smirking looks and called in canny and eager tongues,

"Gormglaith Grendel Hafgan Halsen of Elmtorpe, West Meads, meets Morigan Sparkenbane of Haethwyck by Grasp, Wrath Ness!"

A whopping hush came upon the henge as Morigan gazed at this tall girl with bony limbs, lean thighs, slackenly folded hood peeking from claspen cleft, flat belly with a hint of womb, puffed brims set afar below abiding clavicles and framey shoulders. Morigan's stare settled on an evenly put face with wide mouth and big teeth gleaming bright behind deeply ashened black lips under a straight nose, rather too much but handy on her as brow shadowed blue lake eyes shone from behind a wind blown straw blond thatch which she wasn't shoving back.

"Can I ask thee something, Morigan?"

Her words shivered through the ring.

"Bear with me Gormglaith," came the answer like silver. "Meeting thee like this leaves me a little speechless."

"I know the feeling."

Morigan tilted her head and asked, "Aw, does this mean we don't get to do *Caoilfhionn and Rathnait*?"

Laughter and clapping rang across the henge.

"So why me?" asked Gormglaith.

"I don't know."

"Did you think of asking someone else?"

"In loops."

"Wouldst thou run thy scams on me, Morigan?"

"Rather...!?"

"So, am I meant to teach someday... or what?"

"Yes! ...or whatever," Morigan put with a quick nod.

Tegan grinned down at the granite as Gormglaith glanced off with a start to find Raoghnait staring at her, bright eyed and open mouthed.

Gormglaith swung her head back.

"Do I remind thee of my twin Geileis Grendel from whose womb I tumbled by the bye?"

"Kind of."

"I'd say we're in a stitch then."

"I guess so."

"I've got a grip on mine own life, Morigan."

"I know. Findabair Pane Aghadreen of the Greens and the Farling twins. I mean, I've gotta tell thee Gormglaith, gettin' hinged with those three'd be like spin in Kin Dails."

A hundred whispers fluttered and bounced.

"They know I'm here."

"Yeah, so Devon tells me."

"What's Devon *Rand* doin' hangin' out in *Elmthorpe*?"

"Asking's knowing. By the bye, she said Findabair..."

Morigan's lasered stare was met by the quiver of a hovering blond eyebrow.

"...ate a blue daisy."

Loch henge echoed in gasps. Gormglaith looked up and off to the side, tears running down her cheeks as the ring dwindled into a trough of sighs. Shaking, she said,

"When we braid the blood of our daughters, it's not as if we have much to do with who comes along for the ride, is it."

The hush came from drafts slamming into starry bluestone slabs.

"Whatever. So... as far as I can glark, the hope this afternoon at Wrath ness teach was to plight a fourth banshee snugly knotted to kin 'n clannin, maybe even a thrallish moppet like me who could give a luzz."

Scattered, sniffly giggles flew.

"5,517 years ago," shouted Gormglaith, "on a Midsummer's Eve under the full moon of Esbat, Erin Sparkenbane stood here and spoke the words!"

Gormglaith held forth her arms and from beneath ruffled straw thatch said,

*Free by her
I weave with Wyrð
Through meads and hills and lochs
Nigh thine I stitch my knots
Upon this haunted string*

*As she kisses
This is my pog
As she weeps
These are my tears
And thou unfoldst me*

*The scythe reaps
Slackening and wraithen
Together we bleed!
Make plight for what's meed!
We live in clannin!*

Sheets of screams rained upon her as the sun fell and the light of Loch henge went to true blues, golds, greens and reds flooding across deeply inlaid floors. The two girls faced each other in wildly pitched beams like brightening moonlight.

"So yeah, ok," she said with a nettled shrug.

Gormglaith glanced sidelong at Morigan, then cast her eyes up with head thrown back, thatch flying and arms outstretched as balled fists burst to become open hands.

"Yes!" she shrieked.

The echo rebounded, split and melted across the henge.

After startled whist came another storm of cheers, tears and ripping screams. Morigan cast her wry smile, took a few steps forward and stood among the eight fallen daisies to put dry hands on a waist sharply bladed by hip bones over buoyant thews as Gormglaith's chin rose. They kissed to skeins of ahs, then shyly pulled away, their mouths now smeared and smudged with black ash. Gormglaith swayed with a gobsmacked, sodden and swollen gaze, rather much like someone who has munched on more brownies than she ought whilst Gwenhwyfer called into a third gale but few heard her.

"On Sunaneve, 16 Halegmonath 5494 we beckon a faere banshee, Gormglaith Grendel Hafgan Halsen Sparkenbane! Come with to spill 'n sway at Grasp on Wrath Ness!"

"Come on Gormglaith," said Bairrfhionn, wrapping slender arms about her from behind, "We've got to get out of here... *now!*"

Bairrfhionn and Creiddyladl whisked her in a daze back to the plight lair. The nearby groves were in misty twilight, swans hovering close to shore in their black pond. Wide eyed and shivering, Gormglaith stared at Bairrfhionn.

"Bloody Monandaeg what have I done?"

"Findabair!" she screamed in a heart crushing wail, then fell naked onto the bench and wept, grasping at air.

Loch henge hurled rainbows of light into the evening fog. A shining harvest moon rose above loch Glioon and the high peak of Galad bane glowed ruddy pumpkin from afar as turmoil sprang from a waiting throng when Morigan, Tegan and Raohnailt were spotted outside under the runes. Many mistook Raohnailt for the new banshee and eager girls shrieked, wept and threw wanton throes and kisses with thrusting tongues, some bearing dabs which threw back shifted black light, flashes and sundry hues. Their shouts and calls drew into a hand-somely braided yodel as four thousand Fen Gliooners gathered upon the words, *Forever Findabair!*

"Chill, Raohnailt," said Tegan, looking straight ahead and smiling as they wove their way through swooning flocks and droves.

"Be thyself!" she put with a shrug.

Raohnailt cast her a witchy grin, laughing.

Wraithen as fuck, the new banshee!

Gormglaith was weeping, laid out on the bench, face hidden when Gwenhwyfer rushed into the plight lair. Bairrfhionn stood shaking and tearful at the latticed window, Creiddyladl sitting steadfastly by Gormglaith's side as Gwenhwyfer fell to her knees, gaping in whist dismay.

Gormglaith sobbed in fits and grew still. Red eyed and wet behind a tangled thatch of straw blond, mouth smudged with black ash as if she'd gobbled fire, Gormglaith sat up and glared at Bairrfhionn.

"Let's go see the swans," she said, wiping her eyes.

Wearily pulling on longstockings and cutty sark she ran fingers through her thatch, spied the *Eachdraidh* on the bench, sighed, then reached for it with both hands.

They left Loch henge through a side door unseen in the foggy dusk and by the pond swans came to gab and get pats on their heads as the Sparkenbanes scrunched, haunched, stood, bent and gabbed with swans and about swans and naught else in the twilight.

ginger crushes

They walked in mist and moonlight.

"So what happens now?" asked Gormglaith.

Bairrfhionn, her face puffy from tears, threw a sharp glance. Four casperish girls sitting on a low wall gawked at them and the banshee nodded back with a tight, lopsided smile.

"We'll drop by Cluain house, I guess," she said under her breath, grimacing.

"How thrilling," Gormglaith answered singsong, tossing her head and shoving back straw thatch.

"Rather," sighed Gwenhwyfer as Bairrfhionn kept eyes forward, still sniffing.

With curled upper lip and wagging head, Gormglaith twirled her eyes.

"Truth be told, Gormglaith," said Creiddyladl, nodding, "I thought it was all like something out of the *Eachdraidh*."

From sunken eyes behind a lock of thatch Gormglaith lasered a stare at Creiddyladl as they strolled through windswept, newly fallen leaves between keenly lit, wafered high rises. Nigh a low, bright pumpkin roof with its stacked gore beaming blue-white over the sheer, huesomely smeared walls of another Ben chee inn they came upon a lane bedecked with sparkling ghosts of owls, apples and barley sheaves for Harvest home. She gazed numbly as they strolled by the red and white awnings and pink gleam of the Lighthouse, a malt shop wontedly shown in *Tales of the knotty kindel*. Hanging out by the front doors were a dozen town maegden and a few sulky maedchen in their middle teens, most with unkempt, stringy hair smattered by black light shifting gibecrake and wearing unwontedly big, scuffed klompen. Some leaned coolly against a wall of frostily glowing bricks, looking hard and slurping icy, egg shaped and glimmering pink lightsicles with darkly blued lips. Others were cutting up. Most were in dark grey longstockings which seemed washed out and nagged.

"Lasses!" whispered Gwenthwyfer. "The latest fad ever since Gale in the dales showed up looking like that when they yodeled at the Rink last Beltane. They soak spanking new black linens in one-twelfth rusted water," she said, snickering, "which wrecks the heat craft and drives their kynn bats, mostly."



Gale in the dales | yodeled at the Rink

Gormglaith gazed at a waifish girl whose head was shaven sides and back, long tufts of white and purple hair on top tied off with strings and ribbons, some braided, some not. The blue-lipped lass glanced back with a start, cast an empty stare through bright eyes, then thrust her tongue out at Gormglaith who looked away as the sound of wails and loud clapping rose from behind.

Slinking and sulking towards them came a dozen girls in chalkish linens, tears running in streaks down gaunt cheeks. Six held magnesium ribbon flares which threw blinding white light with flashing hints of green and billowing fogs of wan smoke raining heaps of a floury, fluffy dust. Bystanders caught or scooped this up from the street to throw and smear on each others' faces, garb and hair or push into gaping mouths to eat. Between the brandbearers six more scaanishly dusted girls cast keen shadows as they carried a sparkling beryllium litter holding a mummy, smoothly wrapped in thicknesses of flaxen linen

strips with wide, huesomely embroidered and swatched bands at the waist, lower thighs and ankles. The bluesquash-like shape of a head along with those of edgy shoulders and bony frame were smoothed but somehow stark to see. On the chest was a hint of hands crossed at the wrists whilst below, nestled in a bough of holly, a knot of white lilies lay over the womb.

Bairrfhionn was spotted by a weeping, knob kneed girl whose long ginger hair, face, mouth, chest, arms and black longstockings were thoroughly smeared with milky dry dust. She spun about to cast a kindled stare at the banshee whilst loudly stomping bighty klompen on the tightly laid, flat cobblestones, fists clenched and thrust down at her sides, wordlessly beckoning as if Bairrfhionn had shown up heedlessly late.

Slipping back into tears Bairrfhionn rushed with Gwenhwyfer to a searing, spewing brand under which they caught and crammed the still warm and tumbling scaan dust into their mouths, gathered more to push and fold into their hair, wiping and rubbing each others' chests and limbs until they were almost wholly bane ashen grey. Gormglaith sobbed, then lunged only to be jerked back by Creiddyladl who held on with a steely grip about her forearm.

Gormglaith gasped.

No! mouthed the scollagyn, thick, wan brows raised over eyes alit and shaking her head in battish flurry.

With a wistful shrug Gormglaith nodded and they watched steadfastly as Bairrfhionn and Gwenhwyfer blended with a quickly growing flock in the heady smell of burning cypress, juniper and sandalwood. Meanwhile several lasses brought up the rear and among them was the blond and purple tufted one.

"Who was she?" Gormglaith called out to her.

"Fidach Noichrothach!"

"How many?"

"Three hundred twenty-one! Artn't thou coming?!"

"No... I mustn't."

"Whyever not?"

"I plighted tonight!"

"So come at dawn! Dubh house! It's meant to be a wicked scaan feish... the Gumm Bats might come 'n yodel... so too thrash! We'll all get lashed, I think! Anyway what's thy name? I'm Frap Neen!"

"Gormglaith... Sparkenbane."

"*Too slim, kissin' kin!*" yodeled some giggling, blaze haired lasses, their dinged, heavily oversized wooden klompen clopping (somewhat) to a beat as they clattered by.

"Oh... wow! They say thou didst Findabair dirt! Is it true? ...Aw, lighten up! It's dish, is all! Merry plight then, huh Gormglaith?"

Frap skipped and ran after the others to catch up with the scaan walk which by now had made its flashing way further down the street. Gormglaith gazed in a feaze at Creiddyladl as they stood alone in swirls of dwindling white smoke by the pink gleam of a thoroughly emptied Lighthouse.

The two whistly skirted a nearby corner onto leafy Riding rood and from the sleek black granite lobby of Cluain house rode up to its top, thirty-third floor. Some of the flat's outer, corundum walls could open onto windy slate stoeps. Below, swatches of low clouds and fog glowed by the lights of Fen Glioon and beyond, a moonlit loch swept out between hills and mountains to the east. Creiddyladl grinned at Gormglaith behind her as they climbed a twirling titanium stairway to a loft which had walls and roof so sheer as if to make it seem they were standing in open air under the stars.

"Feep," said Gormglaith. "...Is this Erin's eyrie?"

"Uh huh ...bits anyway."

Creiddyladl peeled her cutty sark and was helping Gormglaith with hers when she called out,

"Hey Raognnailt!"

"Hey..." she answered, halting in her tracks to gape at Gormglaith whelmed in moonbeams.

"...Hi!"

"Hi," said Gormglaith, staring back, her mouth still smeared with black ash.

"Art thou hungry?" the scollagyn asked, smiling bright.

"No."

"Thirsty?"

"Yeah."

"Gwenhwyfer said thou like'st ginger crush. So do I. Want some?"

"Ta!"

"Ok. Creiddyladl?"

"Ta."

"'k, back in a tick!"

Raoghnailt dashed down the stairs.

"Wanna swap thy linens?" asked Creiddyladl as she stepped out of raw alder wood klompen, hooked thumbs into rows of pleats, peeled off her own, lit over to a trip bag, dropped to her knees and rummaged.

"I'm ok for now," answered Gormglaith, looking down.

"'k," said Creiddyladl, unfolding another set of longstockings, standing then quickly stepping into and pulling them on. "Art thou lass?" she asked, tugging at linen on lean thighs below a snugly lip-pish and wan cleft peeking through the teardrop flue.

"Not."

Gormglaith shrugged and smirked.

Creiddyladl looked up, puzzled, hair falling by gaunt moonlit shoulders, then twirled her eyes and fell to knees once more, delving into the bag, grasping at folded linens and plopping them on the floor.

"Gwenhwyfer said there's a sack from Slinn's in here somewhere... yep!" she put with a yank and a crinkling noise.

She stood, holding out folded white cloth.

"I meant into *flued* ones."

"Oh."

"Dost thou want 'em?"

Creiddyladl beside her, Gormglaith hiked the wide, swirling wrap up over her ribs and stared down.

"Here, let me..." said Creiddyladl, reaching to tweak and pull.

They were giggling when Raoghnailt came back with three sparkly tumblers of ginger crush.

"Gasping, Gormglaith," said Raoghnailt, handing her one.

"Ta," she answered, glancing at Raohnailt whilst the three sipped hissing fizzy.

Raohnailt gazed back ever bright.

"Dost thou wanna make out?"

Gormglaith gulped on a mouthful of ginger crush and swallowed.

"Aye," she answered at last, grinning and nodding once.

"Kewl," said Raohnailt, tilting her elfen head.

The scollagyn giggled, pulling her to the middle of the eyrie's snug birchwood box staddle. They kissed in bashful, then merry gathered pog. Creiddyladl shoved Gormglaith's bony shoulders down flat whilst Raohnailt pried her knees afar and she squealed as a wet and lap-pish tongue alighted at the flue. Gormglaith watched Raohnailt's big, deeply set periwinkle blue eyes staring back, nose ring glittering, mouth glued upon the smooth slope between thews of lean thighs before Creiddyladl's mouth opened in a craven latch upon her own.

The harvest moon lit the eyrie in a blue white glimmer increased by starlight and the Milky way's snowy smear. The three napped in a loosely gobbled, snoggish and sometimes latched clump, backs of curled hands on limbs and waists. Creiddyladl stirred first, kissed foreheads, bounded off the staddle and down the braided stairs.

"Oh Gormglaith!" Raohnailt blurted out as they snuggled. "Art thou still a wretch?"

"Sorry."

Raohnailt crinkled her nose and hugged Gormglaith.

"Maybe we should pull ourselves together," said the scollagyn. "We'll be off soon."

"For Wrath ness..."

Raohnailt nodded.

"Dost thou like it there?"

"It's cool... a bit windy... no trees! Most go there, or get sent, for all the keen witches but we have fun too. I miss Blairie sometimes. I'm still clueless as to how I'll split or where I'll haunt after I've gotten myself shee but I guess I'll stay 'till then. Besides, Blodwen and I may handfast."

Gormglaith threw Raohnailt a puzzled look.

In a gleaming bath tiled skeinishly black and white they drenched each other with sprayers and the two scollagyn stopped and stared as the black ash ran from Gormglaith's mouth. Raognnailt grinned and Creiddyladl maedchenly startled an eeking Gormglaith by nudging her from behind with a glowing white cake of chalky natron. Wherewith, Raognnailt smacked Creiddyladl's wet bottom as the wispy scollagyn left the bay.

"Oy!" yelled Creiddyladl, flashing a mirthy glare as she skipped to the sinks.

The three were standing in a row at a looking glass with swatched insets of many hues, running fingers and silver mane combs through their hair when Morigan came by.

"Gormglaith Hafgan Halsen," said Morigan, "is that a *comb* in thy hand?"

"She forgot thou wast here," Raognnailt said breezily, flipping a red streaked lock.

Morigan smirked from a corner of her yet ash besmudged mouth, tugged off longstockings and sprang into the shower bay. Through the looking glass Gormglaith watched as she smooshed her eyes shut and lifted sturdy chin by hollow cheeks to catch glittering teems of steamy rain upon a folkloric face.

Squeakily groomed, the threesome buffily swooped in on a sprawling kitchen, the kind one might stumble across whilst lurking through the lairs of an inn. They found Bairrfhionn, still thoroughly dusted a scaanish grey white, the streaks of dried tears running down her cheeks, sitting with Feegan at a yew wood board, a tray of short-bread and two glasses of bluish milk between them.

"Hi Gormglaith!"

"...Hi!"

"Feegan!"

Creiddyladl ran up to hug fast and beam.

"We stumbled into her on the way here!" Bairrfhionn called over her shoulder, heading for the bath. "She was walkin' over from Woolf house!"

"Ok," said Raognnailt, heedfully eyeing a quivering goblin. "Let's see what gobsy here can cough up tonight..."

"...and *thee*!" said Feegan.

She tugged and hugged Raohnailt with a slap on the bottom, then gabbed with Creiddyladl as they stood together against the kitchen board, leaning back on reedy arms.

"Didst tha hear about Faark?" asked Feegan.

"Last I heard she was livin' in the Snowy abode, up on some way high peak, splittin starlight..."

"No more, she's at the South evermost... bash on!"

"'k, we'll haunt her quick!"

"'k. How's Flocklaith doing? I haven't talked to her in moons."

"She's in ash nest."

"Gasping! Flocklaith?"

"Gone swot. Her life is teach... ash... and smacking *up*, ta," said Creiddyladl, nimbly poking at odd goblins. "Like, never mind the hand-fast, she's never about."

"When did this happen!?"

"Last Ostara, when we started the ring spells with Rathyen. I mean, I'm not sayin' she cuts. I'm only sayin'."

"What's so fetching about Rathyen, then?" asked Gormglaith.

The kitchen went whist. Creiddyladl, Feegan and Raohnailt traded looks as if sharing a laugh, nose rings gleaming in the tight light bouncing off scrubbed titanium.

"Hard core," put Feegan.

"Stern as withies," said Raohnailt.

"Apples..." called Creiddyladl with a wave of her hand as a dish of potatoes and squash popped out.

"...she gives sly spank," the scollagyn tossed off, heading for the board.

Gormglaith stared at Creiddyladl as she settled in front of her foggy dish.

"Like, how a flock of us," Raohnailt began in a trundling banter, "were hangin' out in ash after bowling last Saetereve, eatin' popcorn 'n glommin' ghosts when Rathyen flutters in and Creiddyladl brats *out*, luzzin' herself on the lanky lap, flickin' 'n flappin' like a dove. I mean thou knowst how it is," Raohnailt carried on, spinning her eyes, "when an eggy witch slaps thy bottom with a bit of heed. So everyone's shakin' in the lake or whatever and Creiddyladl's the drenched wench..."

"So wet!" Creiddyladl rang in as Feegan giggled and Gormglaith stayed herself with hands behind, clutching the kitchen board.

"...anyway she goes limp 'n meanwhile Rathyen's doing all she can to peel Creiddyladl off her lap when she looks up like, way startled and asks us in rundles about our spells."

Gormglaith gaped at Raognnailt.

"I'm not boring thee, am I?" asked Raognnailt.

"Oh no, not at all," said Gormglaith, quickly shaking her head.

"'k... so Rathyen has at it with stitched girts 'n folding fits and Creiddyladl's bawlin' blush kerfuffle on the floor when the witch raises her hand and says, 'Which reminds me! Have you ever seen my take on Ffraid Fearchara's clinch of the third bent stitch?' and Gormglaith, I never had. So she launches into that with a goblin, then stops short and says, 'Creiddyladl my bat, why not cast off those noddy blinkums and watch this too? It's rather stirring!'"

Creiddyladl grinned with a mouthful of cheese potato.

Gormglaith looked back at Raognnailt.

"Her take on Ffraid Fearchara's clinch of the third bent stitch is a trip," said Raognnailt, nodding.

"Ever the more when she's havin' a bash at her knotty boppin' moon baste," said Creiddyladl, stabbing a slice of squash.

Gormglaith was leaning forward, mouth agape.

"I've read about Ffraid Fearchara's clinch of the third bent stitch but I've never seen it done either."

Raognnailt gave Gormglaith a beholding look.

"...Th'art a clannin girl!" she said. "I keep forgetting. Whatever," Raognnailt put with a wave. "Art tha hungry yet? I'm having elbow noodlys!"

They were all four seated at the yew wood when Morigan walked in with still damp hair, stopping short to swap stares with Gormglaith.

"Gasping, Morigan," Raognnailt deadpanned with wide eyes. "I barely knew thee myself."

Morigan smirked as she slid onto the bench.

"Uhm... artn't thou having anything?" asked Raognnailt, fork hovering.

"Huh?"

"She forgets..." Raohnailt said to Gormglaith, putting down her fork and rising from the board.

Unswayed, Morigan watched Gormglaith.

"I like how thou dost that..." she said, nodding like a moppet. "It's craven."

Gormglaith answered with a sidelong glance and carried on eating. Creiddyladl followed this, enthralled, slowly chewing on a bite of leek as Morigan blurted out,

"I've always said you can tell skeins about someone by the way she tucks into..."

"...*elbow noodyls*?"

Stopping the fork before her mouth, with moon, stars and the lights of Fen Gloom behind, Gormglaith stood, leaned over the board and put forth a heaping fork of noodyls and pumpkin hued cheese, left hand held beneath. Their gazes locked hard as Morigan deftly nicked and chewed this dollop, swallowing thrice.

"...I knew it!" she said. "Thou *art* stern... a frickin' henge maed-chen! That's why it took me only a tick to snatch the very kindel keep from thy fork with that dodgy *Eachdraidh* scam and why thou spookst the weepy creeps out of everyone."

Gormglaith put down the fork and raised a steadfast chin.

"Ta! In two hundred years maybe we'll haunt this board and talk about all the wraithen stuff our clannin has done together."

"Thou, little sister," said Morigan, wagging a finger as Raohnailt came back with a dish, "art somethin' else!"

"Look at the green..." Raohnailt rang, "so fallain!"

Morigan eyed it at length, like a chary cat, as Raohnailt lit down beside her looking clanninishly worried.

"k, like I botched when I asked for the hemrik, huh?"

"I wouldn't say *botched*. I'd say *kynned*," said Morigan, stirring a wave of giggles.

"Hey Gormglaith," said Raohnailt as she jumped up and lit over to the wall, "this is in the *Eachdraidh*! It's the kitchen tapestry the Weird sisters loomed when they plighted the Sparkenbanes."

"The *Web of wyrd!*" said Gormglaith, getting up to see. "How lap-ping cool..."

After two thousand years the woof woven down the warp was a bit threadbare but its splashed and puzzled hues still shone through.

"Ganders at the norns' knots, I see!" said Tegan, breezing by naked and chalken on her toes, single shock of geal yellow hair damp and lank as she slunk into a wefted, stepped nest calling singsong, "So goes Wyrd as she will!"

Morigan whisked dishes from the board and carried a stack to the kitchen, helped only by four whist stares.

"Fy!" said Morigan as she ran back, throwing up her hands and crushing her eyes shut whilst all broke into laughter. "You let me do it again!"

"What's so funny?" asked Gwenhwyfer, walking in with Bairrfhionn, both now scrubbed and dustless in tidy black longstockings.

Morigan warded at the crumb-strewn yew wood to more giggles.

trigger

The eight of them were waiting in the underground stop below Cluain house when five shees got forward with freckled Bairrfhionn who seemed more than skittishly aware of the sharp looks this sparked from Gormglaith whilst they shrieked and beamed to meet her. On the tram she settled in next to Raoghnailt. Creiddyladl scrunched up against a window, left hand buried deep in her lap, Feegan clutching her right. The others took seats crosswise with many hips and knees rubbing as the tram glid through north Fen Glioon at breathtaking speed.

"We should reach Albans Firth, anyway," said Gwenhwyfer, "in little more than an hour."

The flock was soon within a sparsely lit flight barn, walking across its wide lobby where twirling beams of light played on a pink terrazzo floor. The life sized ghost of a soaring, red billed Frisian white stork with black-edged wings spread to a span of more than six feet (and

flapping now and then) hovered beside yellow runes spelling *Albans Firth*. Here they mingled at a gate with about twenty other girls, a few of whom nudged and nodded towards Gormglaith. Meanwhile under this heed the seven other Sparkenbanes behaved more or less like they'd all been clannin with her for years, even as she and Bairrfhionn plied their start as plighted sisters through fitful glances.

On a bench beneath three strips of blue argon light sat a clanniner with her twin daughter. Both wore thick, wan longstockings, grey cutty sarks and glittery green wooden klompen, their skeinishly embroidered hairbands holding heedlessly combed and greasy fair hair. Big crinkly eyes looked out from faces startlingly alike even for twins. As the clanniner cuddled and nursed a swaddled bairn with bright red hair, the moppet lifted her chin, glommed dish-eyed at Gormglaith and starkly mouthed with thin, ruddy and wordish lips,

Forever Findabair

"The word is *out*," said Bairrfhionn as they walked briskly through the boarding sleeve.

Gormglaith held her onward stare from behind a lock of straw thatch.

The flyer's wide riding lair beckoned forth in narrow beams and light strips with forty blue grey seats, two to a side. The forward tangle lair was lit dimly red beyond a glassy bulkhead.

"Dost tha want the window?" asked Raognnailt.

"Dost *thou*?"

"Uhm..."

"Take it!" said Gormglaith, warding a straight arm.

Raognnailt flashed a grin and scooted onto the window seat as Gormglaith slipped in beside her. Whilst Creiddyladl and Feegan yoked together across the way, Raognnailt eagerly peered out high over the tarmac, then back at Gormglaith.

"Hi everybody," came the slick and even, softly boosted greeting of a flight witch, "Leaving Fen Glioon for Albans Firth, we'll be pulling back in a tick so see to it thy seatmate's buckled in, 'k?"

Raognnailt and Gormglaith fastened wide straps across their hips.

With a soft flump the hatch shut which brought yawning and blinking at the pulling of eardrums. The flyer tugged back then taxied at some speed. With the high rises of Fen Gloom sparkling nearby, the lair beams dimmed and all were shoved hard against their backs. Blue lights rushed by and the flyer rose flush for a dozen yards before tilting skyward. The ground fell away and the nose pitched ever higher with everyone thrown fast in their seats as the flyer punched through the clouds. Through breaks in them, thorpes were clumps of gleam spanned by dotted threads of light. Forward, a witch in the tangle lair's left seat made shallow waves with her hands, then reeled her fingers. The windscreens were black as hornblende and the lights below slipped by ever faster as Creiddyladl and Feegan pugged in lowing beams.

Without a hint the flyer quickened beyond the speed of sound and on the earth's rumpled floor below what glimmers there were slid by in glimpses.

Raognnailt waved her hand, ghosts popped up before them and they flicked their eyes to show each other snips. Among these was a truly early *Tales of the knotty kindel* showing four stealthy maegden with bloody upraised palms handfasting behind a crumbling green henge, a moodily lit lass reel with thrashsome throes, which they lingered on, then a fylgijal one with flax faerie calls, then some of the bamfish casts Geileis liked. Raognnailt brought up Muirin Figan in a blue glass-walled kitchen on foggy chalk cliffs, telling in her ever so clipped, Frisian way how one might stitch glion groudle pye from scratch with nary a blip from any robot or pink.

"Why do I think this is happening now?" asked Gormglaith.

"It is," said Raognnailt, staring slack jawed. "She's doing it. Didst tha hear that? She so too *awed* the *ah* of *connaghyn*. What a snot!"

The scollagyn curled her upper lip as Muirin smoothly sliced three connaghyn onions into wafers thin as linen.

"I could never do that," sighed Gormglaith, shaking her head. "I'm all thumbs in a kitchen."

Raognnailt nodded wistfully, blinking into a toon with edgily fetching pillywiggins, throbbing beats and takes on notched string spells for moppets.

"Hey... look fast!" said Raognnailt, nodding out the window as Kin Dails swept by far below them, shining bluish white by the Running river's narrow black ribbon.

Back to ghost blinking Raognnailt brought up the long yellow blond hair and heavy eyelids of a skeeal reader named Grizel Brynk, her steady tongue rundling in the trundled lilt of Fen Glioon.

"...whist, but word was spread through the more than three hundred who saw it. By some tellings, thousands greeted the latest banshee of Wrath ness as she came out of Loch henge."

Meanwhile by Grizel's side bamfed a ghosted cast of Gormglaith standing before what was left of the old henge at Clannin field on the outskirts of Kin Dails, its bluestones awash in moonlight. The ghost's sunken eyes were blue lake and canny. A nose ring threw off its gleam over plight blackened lips. Wearing bane white Glen pelyn longstockings with their pleated wrap pulled snug under bare chest, shoulders back with arms at her sides, she skipped breezily (and rather lankily) to and fro before the bluestones. Then, to the strains of a Kin Dailish song done up in the very latest high shift eight upons the ghost seamlessly threaded her steps into a shawn trews, throwing short kicks with blond klompened feet on the cropped turf almost like a hard fylgjie reeler, or perhaps any sly and dashing maegden who might happen to pull scaanishly from the *Eachdraidh* nigh a mossy henge by the beaming harvest moon.



Erin Mynter's trigger | nigh a mossy henge

"Bloody flurt..." said Gormglaith, brow knit, slackjawed.

"...it looks more like me than I do."

"Gasp!" said Raohnailt.

"That's my frickin' Slinn's gauge!"

"Thou art such a brat!"

"It's trigger! They've got me skippin!"

"...The loop we've got here was crafted this very eve by Erin Mynter, who saw the plight at Loch henge and says she got so stirred up! We're told this is already one of the most asked-for loops Erin's ever put out. If you're only now flicking in, she's Gormglaith Grendel Hafgan Halsen, from a way thrallish clannin at Elmathorpe, that's in the West meads. Two of her kynn are Grendels of Kin Dails and another's Blairie."

Gormglaith's ghost skipped back among the soaring bluestones and went out of sight, only to happily skip back out again, spot on as before, sealing the loop.

"We hear she didn't do an oardagh with Morigan, puzzling instead, 'Am I meant to teach someday?' When told her friend Findabair ate a daisy upon hearing she was at Loch henge, Gormglaith gave a fylgic talk. Then she got herself in clannin with Erin Sparkenbane's plight call *Free by her I weave with Wyrd*, to cheers and weepy screams. By the bye, that long forgotten swatch of *Eachdraidh* seems to've been the canny hit. We're told, ever since Gormglaith left the bluestones a few hours ago, most of the plights at Loch henge have been ending with this call. The webs are abuzz with dish and as word threads in, we hear the same call's now being heard at other henges throughout the wide worl..."

"Fuck!" said Gormglaith, blinking hard and staunching the ghost.

Raohnailt gaped as others whispered, casting glances.

"Thou *mustest* not listen to what they say about thee..." put Gormglaith, holding out her hands and shaking her head.

"...or thou mightst start believing it."

"I think it's *spooks*!" said Raohnailt, shivering and bright eyed.

"Too spooks," said Gormglaith. "I mean what do they know about me, anyway? Besides, what's with all the gab? I'm meant to be a bloody banshee, never mind the faerie tale nose ring which I don't *even* have yet! What'll Geileis think?"

Raognnailt nodded quickly as Gormglaith plopped back in her seat, blowing up a lock of thatch with her breath.

"...and another thing! I was there and I didn't see thousands of girls when they snuck me out that frickin' side gate!"

"Uhm, truth be told, I think they thought I was..."

Raognnailt wagged a finger back and forth between them. Gormglaith gave her a sidelong look. Neither could quash a grin so they burst into giggles as only maegden can.

The flyer's steady wooshing had dwindled to low pink noise and they rode on a sturdy glide, now and then with barely felt, stiff bounces.

"So we're back beyond Elmthorpe I guess," said Gormglaith, leaning by Raognnailt to see out the window.

Few lights sparkled below.

"...Way," put Raognnailt with eyebrows raised.

"Ok everybody," said a flight witch, "we're over the Rank, a bit faster than five snaps, up about six leagues and nearly at the top of our bow."

"Come on!" said Raognnailt, tossing her head. "Let's have a peek!"

Reaching and opening the glassy hatch of the tangle lair they gazed through its windscreens at a moonlit and cloud smeared, bent earth streaming below them. Neither witch had a hand on the pumpkin hued goblin in front of her although they watched heedfully whilst talking.

"Hey y'all," said a tall, lightly freckled witch with short tousled hair and a slight gap between her front teeth.

"How's the ride?" asked the other, her hip length black hair shivering as she looked Gormglaith up and down.

"Like storks!" she answered, nodding.

Next they headed aft down the flyer's length towards its galley, glancing at Morigan and Gwenhwyfer who were deeply entwined in a game of fox and goose. With ginger crushes in nearly weightless sheer tumblers they slid back into their seats as Bairrfhionn knelt beside them and tried to start a gab by saying sun time upon landing would be about the same as when they'd left Fen Glicoon.

"We saw a bit of Grizel Brynk..." said Gormglaith.

"Yeah, Tegan 'n me too."

"Yeah... along with Erin's handy fad bait."

"Is it so blatant?" Bairrfhionn asked with a toothy smirk.

"As if anyone gives a luzz what I think! It's trigger is all, like when Keird Kesh kicked the same bleeding reel by Kerrin henge in Kirkcaldy 1400 years ago."

"I hear that rather spun," said Bairrfhionn.

"Whatever. If I *must* be shown skippin' the shawn trews by a henge under the pulling moon I guess y'all have a grip even if I don't."

"I like it," said Raognnailt, "even if it *is* trigger."

"I'll tell Erin!" said Bairrfhionn, standing. "She only got started on it after dusk, tha knowst!" the banshee called over her shoulder.

Gormglaith sighed. Outside the window, thorpen clusters of light shone on the trundling hills of Northumberland.

Throughout the steep and slackening, ear popping drop they were thrown forward against the straps, then watched the moon peek by scattered clouds as the flyer skimmed over the hilltops of Argyll giving way to shimmering coastal Albans Firth. After a long, bending glide over white-topped waves, blowing grasses came up under the glow of landing lights and the flyer's wide tyres seamlessly gripped hard slush-stone as its nose dipped deeply then lifted smoothly back. The craft crept up to a glassy gate and ears popped again when the hatch pulled in and slid open.

In brisk night air the eight girls stood on a high stoep, their faces lit geal blue by the gleam of a frosted wall. Hair flew in a howling, salty wind as the Keayn sheear's mighty surf crashed ashore below them. Tegan gazed through an opening in scooting clouds at three glittering stars against the many-hued spray and shadow of the Milky way.

"Hmph," she said, "look. There's Wega like bells... do you see? It's the bright white one on top of the Clarsach, farthest right of the fall gore. It'll be the north star again, in nine thousand years. The Farlanes were two light years out, twenty-three to go when they were last heard from more than five thousand years ago. We're likely looking at whatever's left of them," Tegan sighed.

"Wouldst thou guess there *is* something?" Gormglaith asked, staring into starry space. "...Or someone?"

"Not with any luck," said Morigan, who drifted off as the wind blew ranting honey blond hair across her face.

They flocked through a spindled lobby. As in Fen Glicoon some stared, a few even smiled and waved. Later a skate streaked north through the thoroughly lit high rises of inner Albans Firth, wending at whist high speed into dark Muir downs along the deep firths and lochs of the western coastal Highlands.

Gwenhwyfer and Creiddyladl waved when, at a lively looking thorpe, three maegdenish twins got on, the sides and backs of their heads shaved bald, sundry tufts and locks of ash blond hair knotted in ragged bands shifting black light. Each wore a beat but fit black linen cutty sark over harshly washed dark grey longstockings and was shod in heavy black klompen inlaid with silver stars.

To the wonder of all Gormglaith rose, spun up a sparkly smile and walked over to the lasses. Morigan leaned forward with a start but was stopped by Gwenhwyfer's quickly outstretched arm.

"Hi! I'm Gormglaith!"

She was greeted by three sets of lasering eyes as three cold blue-lipped mouths went agape.

"Hi," said one of the twins, reaching up to shake her outstretched hand. "...Keain. This is Ketch... Kishan."

"I mean," said Gormglaith, shaking hands with the other two, "Gale in the dales! Like, *so* lass!"

Keain looked Gormglaith up and down with a puzzled smirk then sneered, shaking her head.

"Celt slut," sang Ketch in an edgy whisper, brooding out the darkened window.

Kishan, with thighs spread, klompen set flat and hard on the deck, flicked a tilted middle finger.

Keain nodded at Gormglaith, splaying her hands.

"Wanton goblin, wilt tha cut, too?"

"I like Gale! Apple pye with like, big scoops of vanilla ice cream on top. Th'ever try it?"

It was reedy Creiddyladl, staring down Keain, nose ring gleaming.

"...*Keainikins*. I'll have a ready bash at gollopin' the odd bit of spog now and then... 'n no worries! She'll grok soon enough it's Gummies who spin the kin with the canny slim on lass. *Too slim, kissin' kin!* ...but whatev," she said, taking Gormglaith by the arm and winking at them. "This is my new sister, 'k? Truth be told she's rather clever... when she's not having a fit!"

The scollagyn breezily pulled a hapless Gormglaith away. She sank to her seat in a stitch as Raoghnailt, now standing, stuck her tongue out at Keain, Ketch and Kishan.

"I was about to tell thee," put Raoghnailt, warding her hands and plopping back down.

"I'm sorry Gormglaith," said Gwenhwyfer. "It's my botch, I thought thou knewst..."

"*Gumm Bats* were first with the gear..." whispered Creiddyladl, "'n it's true Gale nicks but, Gummies only ever yodel in the flesh which is maybe why y'all never heard about them in Elinthorpe. They've feished for years at those lekker little lass haunts in Albans Firth 'n their tales *can* be cool even if the shee baiting does wear a bit thin after awhile. Meanwhile Keain, Ketch 'n Kishan Killeen are grind core, far Highlands clannin lassies and here comes the clueless raw wood-shod Celt scolly from the sticks, flingin' gooseberries!"

Tears slid down Gormglaith's cheeks. She buried face in hands as the skate skied through moonlit hills of the northwestern coast.

The Killeens got off at Skipthorpe, barrowishly nestled on a gale swept firth of treeless heath on the southern reaches of Wrath ness. Kishan stopped to cast the Sparkenbanes a wanton smile, arms held at wild pitches echoing a kind of fylgjie reel as she thrust her flat, scammeled chest at them.

"Forever Findabair," she whispered, letting her head drop loose and askew before being pulled out by a stern hand, short hair and long limbs flying.

The skate plied swiftly through trundling coastal hills and wind-blown heather. There were bits of talk about nearby thorpes and lanes. Feegan brightly soaked it in but Gormglaith's eyes were glazed as they glid to a stop under a spare, floodlit shelter called *Wrath ness*. Soon all eight had bunched into a silvery sled which sped between winding, low stone walls overbrimming with peat. From inside all one could see was the blurred sweep of headlights upon a burrowish lane and Gormglaith stiffened, gripping bony hands with Raognnailt. Then the moon broke through fast flowing, ragged clouds to show Haethwyck by Grasp sunken halfway into a darkly heathered rise, its henge-like slabs of weathered black granite with tall windows aglow in sundry hued corundum. They walked through a stiff, chilling wind by the footlights of a garden close and came through a wide threshold with glassy latticed doors giving way to Haethwyck's lobby of blond woods and hornblende, clopping across a swatched floor of sundry black spinel stone spattered with light.

Creddyladl and Feegan giggled as they lit off by lasered sheets of blue, green and yellowish pumpkin then darted down a wide hall. Gormglaith stared after them.

"I know," said Morigan. "Everyone thinks of an inn at first but it's the canny cozy barrow once thou getst a grip."

"There's wont to be more girls about, too," put Bairrfhionn.

"Yeah, keep the plight under wraps 'till y'all think she won't flee or have another fit..."

"Gormglaith!" they answered together.

"Sorry," she said, arms flopping to her sides.

"Anyway I'm gonna pop in the dens for awhile," said Morigan. "Little sister... I'm so happy," she whispered shyly.

Morigan went towards a set of doors inlaid with spackles of yew, followed by Tegan, who winked at Gormglaith.

"Fy Morigan!" said Bairrfhionn, eyes scrunching shut. "I forgot... we saw Too slim in Kin Dails yesterday."

Morigan froze before the doors, then whirled.

"Bloody nickenzie!"

"On Running west, near Slinn's. She zipped by the three of us on the back of a bunchberry, smilin' a scythe."

"That'll be the iceberg's tip then," said Tegan, wheeling.

Gwenhwyfer shrugged with a simpering grin and followed. Bairrfhionn glanced at Gormglaith, threw up her hands and fled through the brightly inlaid doors which closed behind them as Gormglaith swung about to Raohnnailt.

"Who's Too slim?"

"Twisted tale. Come on."

"Where are we going?" asked Gormglaith, staying put.

"The Heathering."

"What's the Heathering?"

"Thou'lt see," said Raohnnailt. "It's eggy."

She led her through a greywacke hall hung with tapestries, its floor also swatched in many shades of spinel black. Every dozen yards on either side were cunningly puzzled wide doors, one of which opened into a nest of chinked pink stone walls with stammeringly woven boxed wood craft overhead, a black feldspar floor shot through with chalken threads and a skeinishly paned set of windows, their deep sills like the stone underfoot. Along the inner wall was a low nest staddle buried in layers of rough black cotton. A tapestry clung to the wall, its weave of startling depth and cast showing a silver bark Yggdrasil tree under boughs of clouds in a blue sky. Dew drops rained from its leaves upon three naked, white thatched girls huddled fast together on one of three gnarled roots with woven, knotty runes below spelling *Well of wyrd*. Nearby a stack of dish sized quartz wafers hung low from far above to throw keen beams on both the tapestry and the staddle's headboard, a starry skein of ash, yew and rowan wood.

"So... whatd'st thou think?" asked Raohnnailt.

Gormglaith raised a blond eyebrow and Raohnnailt cracked her brat's grin, then asked,

"...Is gobsy there?"

"Yes Raohnnailt..." sighed the wearily reckoned speech of a pink.

"Could we have whatever spun tonight, ginger crush 'n popcorn?"

"Flung."

"Ok," said Raoghnailt, "I have to tell thee, that's all."

"About Too slim?"

"Gormglaith!? Breeze the fast slipping lack left to thee of any heedful awareness about Too slim and please listen!"

Gormglaith wheeled her right hand.

"...k. There're more than two dozen nests about and any one of them would likely swoon *out* to give the new banshee a spin. Most are in the thorpe but there are five here at Haethwyck and they're all named after Highlands trees though with all of but one tree anywhere *even* close don't ask me why, I don't know. Ash aspen beech birch pine. Pine is Frisian and always has been, they say. Beech is like, Kin Dails on Wrath ness, a pog bog where snot clannin bats hook up with Blairie brats and nobody would know wanton if it walked up and lapped them in the ear. Aspen, ash and birch are stern. Tegan and Gillian hang out in aspen. It's tangled, whist and hard core and ash is like, so too harsh. Tha canstn't even slash in there without someone wondering what it's all about. That leaves birch. It's cool. Morfyd and Morigan nest birch. I nest birch, there're but nine of us for now, we tell slumbertales and thou'rt beckoned!"

Raoghnailt looked down at her big blond wooden klompen.

"I mean, to try... if th'art not getting tired of me already... I know I can be..."

"Not, Raoghnailt..."

Raoghnailt's head popped up, she beamed, grabbed Gormglaith's hands and yanked her into a hug. Meanwhile a copper clad, hip high house robot padded into the nest on two thick legs, put Gormglaith's *Eachdraidh* and gore on the board, ambled into a bath with pink walls like the nest, tucked linens in a cupboard and left with a rather tootish whistle. Raoghnailt stripped off her cutty sark and hung it with Gormglaith's. Trading stray glances they pulled on flued long-stockings, skipped to the wide staddle and plopped down.

"I guess we could watch the clannin skeeal," said Raoghnailt. "The only thing is, Eiric's gonna to talk about thee..."

"Eiric?"

"Our skeeal reader. She smacks up a bit but, thou knowst, she's one of the flock so it's ok... kinda poggen, too. Anyway her moods are wont to be more enthralling than what she says. Wanna see?"

"k."

"k," said Raohnailt, gathering limbs cross legged on the heaped cotton as Gormglaith did likewise.

A scollagyn with short golden red hair bamfed in, sitting at a green geayne stone desk in front of a Frisian tapestry so cool as to be almost barren. The sides and back of her head were shaved in a way that made her seem stern to most girls, an edginess lifted by nebbish breasts.

"She makes these before supper, if there's something to spill."

"Hey everybody," Eiric began, "it's Saeterdaeg, 15 Halegmonath and here I am nigh sunset. As we're all hearing, our fourth banshee's plighted with the falling sun at Loch henge in Fen Glioön. Her name's Gormglaith Hafgan Halsen, a Celt clannin girl from Elmthorpe, that's in West meads, brought in at Kin Dails in 5476 and by the wombs, twin daughter of her neach kynn Geileis Grendel. I'm told she's sly with *Eachdraidh* and was cracking through the whole thing. Anyway they'll likely be here tonight and Monandaeg is Gormglaith's flurt."

Gormglaith cast a startled look at Raohnailt.

"Also coming with is Feegan Raine-Blairie, carrying over to Wrath ness. Lots of us know Feegan... Blairie b-thrice, 5475, likes luzz ball and she's nesting beech. So Gormglaith and Feegan, if you see this which I hope y'all will... Fettle nest!"

"See?" said Raohnailt. "Bash on..."

"Harvest home at Skipthorpe carries on tomorrow..."

Ghosts of clanniners, moppets, maedchen, maegden, scollagyn and shees laughing and screaming on fun-garden rides and frolicking among food stands flashed about Eiric.

"I was there... and threw up. I ate a pocket buttty and *so* too much ice cream before going on the twirlitwix."

"It was yewberry."

"Faerwin's ash boards are having supper in the grass up by the lighthouse this evening. If you wanna come with, meet them in the teach close at sunset."

"Some of us had a football match this after on Laid green with a flock of clannin bats from Tongue. We lost five to four on a goal kicked in by Fret Fellstone."

A footballer in white, thick, heavily seamed and grass stained field linens which left her barefoot below swaddled ankles, kicked a blinding goal by a scolly in black who fell splat into wet turf.

"That's all I have, taz!"

Eirie's head wagged in mirth as her ghost bamfed.

"...My flurt?!"

"Gormglaith thou plighted fourth banshee of Wrath ness tonight."

"I'll be ladgeful."

"Don't *even* worry about it. Most girls'll be thinkin' about havin' fun 'n bein' spooks themselves."

"Tha make'st it sound like nothing."

"Cake... I make it sound like cake."

"By the bye," said Raohnailt, "wantsta see trigger? Glom onto *this* scaanikins... throwin' the wonted flax faerie calls, *not*, straight off the inner web."

A ghost of a girl, thick blond braids bedecked with periwinkle blue flax blossoms, in bane white, flued and much rumpled Glen pelyn longstockings, Gillian Goblyn bamfed into the Heathering, then, still standing on the flats of blond alder wood klompen, went up on her toes.

"*Yah!*..." Gormglaith mouthed under her breath.

"Flax faerie calls!" Gillian put with a lekker kin, maedchen smirk. "Some say callin' flax faeries is so too stern or only for reelers but... naw! Scollies know the luzzin' truth!"

"'k, first, let's bash at a *flax blossom*! So, thrustin' like frike 'till we're blue as... flax blossoms, gettin' high as we can on our toes is all, klompen rundled in a bit as you see, shoulders way scrunched up with arms cast out 'n forward like this, fingers beckonin' any flax faeries that may be lurkin' about. It's fetchin', but way forward so we don't dare overthrow this luzzy!"

Gillian then cast herself into a blisteringly overthrown throe.

"I mean," said Raohnailt, "*she* can get away with it, but couldst tha even *think* of throwin' such a thing?"

"We did. When we were moppets. Lots."

"Yeah, so did we... playin' flax faeries on the fairr..."

"Droppin' to shins 'n sittin' on klompen heels," Gillian carried on, "we're *flingin' flax*, ever handy 'n steadfast, knees afar, length of forearm and fist, hands on thighs, palms open 'n up, shoulders way back like so... then chill. Wanna swot the hackle? Fling flax. Wanna stir a malted? Lift noggin, open wide and lap *out* like this."

Gormglaith's jaw dropped. Gillian limberly unfolded and rose to her feet in a single throw, arms at her sides.

"I hope this was helpful," she sighed. "...Ta!"

Her cast snapped a sleek, braid flipping spin and bamfed off. Gormglaith drew herself up.

"Can we watch it again?"

Raoghnailt burst out laughing.

As the third playback ended the worn looking copper house robot beeped a skeinish song as it wobbled up to the board, lowered lidded dishes and two ginger crushes, backed up rather charily, stopped, then made fast for the door.

Raoghnailt skipped and slid over.

"That's the brew," she said, lifting the shiny lids. "Tonnes of hues..."

Here were dumplings and a chunky soup of roots, followed by chilled berries. Then came a thickly frosted chocolate cake.

"Wicked!"

Raoghnailt answered with a nod since her mouth was crammed full.

"So how 'bout it?" she asked, swallowing. "Wilt tha go for the blush or what, then."

"Docking flurts," Gormglaith put with a shrug, raising a forkful of spog, "I'll bloody blush."

"Thou *art* hard," she said, taking another bite and munching.

"...What."

"Creiddyladl for one," said Raoghnailt, grabbing a bowl of popcorn as they lit back to the staddle. "She was raised in Fen Glioon but a wee stroll from Loch henge like, way spoiled by her north shore kynn... the swank *it* girl, wacking clueless clannin bat."

Gormglaith nodded.

"Er, I didn't mean that bit about, uhm, thou knowst. I'm sorry..."

"Raohnailt!?"

"'k... when Creiddyladl pledged, she had all these bumpkin notions about snot shees and scollies swooning over songs, swotting spells and playing clarsachs with like, wild daisies stuck in their hair or something," said Raohnailt, taking a puffed purple kernel of popcorn.



With like, wild daisies | swooning

"Whatever. Then she got here, took one look about and had a fit. Not shy... a docking fit is all. She haunted her kynn for nights, srike, ranting about carrying over to some icky snot teach one of them had gone to at Adelboden way up in the freakin' Alps. It spun out though. Creiddyladl's a brat and I must say, she strums a *dank* clarsach."

"So why the jag?"

"Clueless! The wonted clannin girl brew."

Raohnailt shrugged and took another puffen of popcorn.

"I'm a clannin girl."

"That's cool."

Gormglaith gazed at Raohnailt.

"I know what th'art thinking," said Raohnailt, staring back.

"Thou dost not!"

"I do."

Raohnailt shoved more popcorn into her mouth.

"Raohnailt!"

"It's all most clannin bats can *even* brood on..."

"...I mean," she said after more munching, "when they pledge."

Gormglaith cast a chary glare.

"Besides I could care less if th'art a banshee or whatever."

Raohnailt looked down and squirmed.

"Oh Gormglaith I'm sorry! We've only known each other an evening and I'm already smitten by a crush on thee kerfuffle!"

The scollagyn buried her head in hands.

"I am such... a bumpkin!"

"I know the feeling."

Raohnailt, sniffing, wiped her eyes.

"Thou dost?"

With a nod, Gormglaith sniffled and wiped hers too.

Raohnailt pounced on her and they kissed in the taste of popcorn, their hands in edgy clutch. Face buried in the maegden from Elmthorpe's neck, Raohnailt tweedled to smells of skin and thatch, then sniffed and licked Gormglaith's underarms to ticklesome giggles. Raohnailt fell on her back, arms outstretched. Gormglaith grinned, crawling over her with long, lanky legs and arms as they hugged crossways, splayed and flat, kissing clefts in steady beats, then fast, gabbish pogs as if in nesty gossip, at last with open mouths trothfully sealed upon damp and pulling latches.

Gormglaith awoke with Raohnailt's head on her shoulder, their arms bundled together on her waist. A wafered beam still lit the *Well of wyrd*'s greens, blues and silvers as Raohnailt slumbered, saffron eyebrows knit. The tall windows flashed with blue lightning and showers fell in sheets outside but within the Heathering only a far off white noise was heard. She smothered herself in Raohnailt's flaxen, red freaked hair, then trundled the both of them, thrusting a soggy tongue against the tightly folded dimple betwixt slimly straight and grasping thighs. To the yodel of Raohnailt's wails she drew steadfastly deep inside lean and buoyant thews which gripped her face in a starved, drenching fall harvest rain. These tautened, then fluttered wildly as Raohnailt shrieked, "Gormglaith! ...Fuck! Oh Gormglaith..."

the splits

Her eyes opened to daylight and she looked down to see two reedy arms twined about her middle. Meanwhile Raohnailt pulled in flush from behind, healed her hold and sighed whilst Gormglaith gazed at the skeinish blue veins under her skin. Later their arms were jumbled loosely. Gormglaith nestled her head on a big pillow, the left side of which was deeply embroidered, the other half swan-white. Raohnailt watched her with sleepy eyes, face puffy from slumber, red-streaked flaxen hair tumbling in tangles to chalken cheeks. Her smell was braided with the sharp, sweet and sour edges of cairmeal and slattag ghlass as periwinkle blue eyes keened and they stared at each other in a wraithen hush.

Raohnailt squirmed and with witchy grin threw aside black cotton, leapt from the staddle and darted across the smooth feldspar floor on her toes with neach longstockings much rumped and rimpled from sleep to speak tumbling words meant for the house robot bringing breakfast.

Sitting up in a stretch, Gormglaith looked through windows glazed here and there with panes of blue, green and yellow at a treeless, misty slope of windblown purple heather. Walking to the low sill she stopped still to eye half a dozen black and dashing, white-swathed magpies hopping quickly sideways in the grass nearby, their wings barely open.

"Three for plighting," she whispered, "...four for a birth," then peered over at a sheltered, deep dark blue swimming pool also aproned in black feldspar with tall, swaying green breck and faiyr beyond. Five naked scollagyn bobbed and swam like wan trout in the shaded, sparkly water. One clambered up a six-yard diving ledge, held out her arms, flew off, spun thrice and knifed in with hardly a splash.

"I like to swim," said Raohnailt coming up beside her, "but I paddle like a catfish and dive like a tern."

"I've been likened to an oghtapus..." Gormglaith said, nodding as she watched the maegden swim nimbly underwater for the pool's length then pull herself out with a single thrust.

Raohnailt brightened.

"I like oghtapuses!"

They giggled.

"What time is it, anyway?"

Raohnailt looked at the sky.

"Barely dipped after noon, I reckon."

The copper robot came with berries, droops, scones, seeds, two tumblers of rowanberry and a bighty black pitcher of hot chocolate. They smirked as this quirkysome old gadget warily scanned the ruffled staddle and with much the wobble set a tray on the edge. Raohnailt helpfully put it in the middle.

"This is spog," she said, pouring two mugs of purple chocolate then biting hungrily into a flaky scone.

"It's from Fen Glioon."

Gormglaith nodded, mouth also full of scone. Raohnailt took a dripping big red boxberry and crushed it in a ruddy burst among bright white teeth whilst Gormglaith ate a blue plum.

Raohnailt held up another boxberry. Gormglaith reached for it but the scollagyn's eyes narrowed as she shook her head and nudged it into the chary maegden's mouth, withdrew wet thumb and forefinger then sucked them dry and raised a mug of chocolate. Gwenhwyfer breezed into the Heathering as this saga spun out, her yellow, white freaked hair shifting black light from the bounce of afternoon sunshine.

"Hey y'all!" she said with a wide awake, broad smirk.

"Hi Gwenhwyfer," they called singsong, more or less together.

Gwenhwyfer plopped onto thick cotton and slid by her knees to the tray.

"I like these," she said, taking a blue plum.

The three munched wordlessly.

"So... was it a fallain fall morning's sleep?" Gwenhwyfer asked, eyes crinkling and shifting from Raohnailt to Gormglaith as she drank from Raohnailt's tumbler.

Gormglaith nodded, sipping chocolate.

"How 'bout thee?"

"Slept like a stone. I must have done anyway, can't recall a bloody thing. So Gormglaith, Tegan wants to know if thou mightst drop by for a wee hew...?"

"A wee *hew*...?"

"A bit of the splits, thou knowst," she said, holding up thumb and forefinger, "if tha like'st."

She shrugged and took another plum.

"Gwenhwyfer?! I only got here last night!"

Her sister banshee answered with bright, sunken eyes and a battish nod.

Gormglaith stared back.

"Someone'll fetch thee then!" said Gwenhwyfer, scooting off the staddle to breeze from the nest, hair flying as she glanced back with a grin, gnawing into the plum.

Gormglaith whirled about to Raognnailt.

"Ok, that was fast."

"So too wontedly."

Gormglaith and Raognnailt were waiting groomed and combed when two scollagyn came. One was Eiric, her swatch of golden red hair shimmering in daylight. Gaid was a whist, knobby girl with two deep red, hip length braids tied up in winding green ribbons. With less than a word and more than a hug Raognnailt dashed off.

"Any teaching clannin," said Eiric as they walked along the wide hall, "has its dish, which means a gollop first so it's all puke."

Gaid gaped at Eiric, then Gormglaith.

"...Raognnailt's spot on, Eiric. Thou *art* enthralling," Gormglaith put with a chalky, shruggish smile, "and I like how thou readst the skeeal."

Gaid cast up her eyes and Eiric beamed as they came through the black hornblende lobby where a knot of scollagyn met them near the wafered lights, gabbing in a skein of names. Then they went through an airy hall with paned doors, stopping at one between tall and narrow frosted windows cut with runes.

Eiric and Gaid left her off with swotty little waves and Gormglaith drew a deep breath as she walked into a den with deeply puzzled, wooden box crafting overhead and wide windows below which spilled sweeping sights of purple, green and yellow heather sloping seven furlongs to the cliffs of the blue Keayn sheear.

A time telling gadget set in a granite wall ticked to the sweep of six black, white and striped hands in sundry lengths on a dish which was pye-sliced in dark blue, pumpkin and white, bearing an almost full moon in the middle and showing it was in the early sweep between noon and dusk at Haethwyck.

"Hello Gormglaith, it's chilling to see thee again."

The lone waist-length lock of hair on top of Tegan's head glowed geal yellow and was pulled tightly back. Her black Glen pelyn long-stockings and the wonted blond wooden klompen were set off by ash blackened lips and that seeming stitch of teach witches, black gloves sheathing her arms but opening at the knuckles to show gangling blue veined fingers and closely clipped white nails.



Tegan | that seeming stitch

"Shee bannee mee Tegan!" Gormglaith deadpanned. "Oo lonraghey lesh yn conney freoaie."

"Er-egin," said Tegan, quickly gathering herself. "Kany's ta shiu, er-giyn ayd chied madjin 'sy Haethwyck?"

"...Kestal!" answered Gormglaith, grinning broadly. "Fastyr mie!"

Tegan gave her a beholding look.

"Meed afternoon thyself," she put with a smirk, then slunk to a wooden bone board with twelve matching, narrow high backed chairs. Here warm grains ran in red rusts, seared pumpkin hues and yellows through whorls rubbed smooth long ago under thousands of scollagyn elbows and hands. The witch twirled about, tossing her head.

"So how'rt thou feeling? No headaches, *dizzy spells*, stomach aches, cramps, anything like that?"

"I'm ok Tegan... other than feeling like, pitched, stitched and *bewitched* by Gwenhwyfer's talk about bloody splits. I mean can a girl at least have a tick to catch her breath or what."

"Devon was spot on."

"...What."

"Skip it. We need thy help."

"Uhm, Tegan, as I recall, thou wast in Loch henge yesterday, as in... plighted sister banshee?"

"Yeah... speaking of Loch henge it's about that fit thou hadst."

"I didn't fold... until they had me cozily stashed behind the sound screens of that plight lair..."

"Gormglaith thou swooned and Bairrfhionn caught thee."

"...Fuck."

"That's a cheer."

"Anyway I'll bloody swoon when I want, 'k?"

"Ok! Besides, as far as I can tell it came off like spin in Kin Dails. Some want to see how it tangles, is all."

"So th'art telling me... if green Gormglaith could like, lick a few splits it might boost wiles the latest banshee's so fuckin' tight, she can keel over at Loch henge 'n hew rainbows in the blink of night and day. That not only *reeks*, but someone's weavin' a brat swank fad on Erin Mynter's trigger, spun with *my* Slinn's gauge by the bye thanks for asking my leave, *not* and Enid says where there's a fad, there's a fumble."

"I've never run into that before..."

"Thou shouldst talk to Enid."

"I think I will... and tell her I've never met a henge maedchen who says *fuck* as much as thee."

"Oh, sorry. So what's the fumble?"

"We'll get there, little sister," Tegan said with the wink of a frosty grey eye.

They settled at the bone board. Tegan put elbows to wood, chin in hands with a cloth bound book (*Mote string thresholds* by Randottir) and frothy mug of coffee beside her, looking rather lass. Gormglaiith inhaled deeply, gazed ahead and her fingers reeled with goblins.

She soon looked away, squinting and bleary eyed.

Tegan pulled her up by the hand, then outside onto a shady stoep of scrubbed bluestone which was empty but for a small board bearing coffee and ginger crush with starkly blue flax blossoms beyond, swaying in the sea breeze.

Gormglaiith seemed feazed and lost in the cool salty air lofting smells of flax and grasses but she grinned when Tegan swept her into a drop-some kiss, the witch's geal yellow lock wafting in the windswept, dark shade. They sat in chairs with tall straight backs, shyly, wordlessly, heads down, both sheerly hiding grins. Then Gormglaiith drifted, barely sipping ginger crush, looking from the Keayn sheear and wide swaths of sun dappled turquoise slipping through deep blue waves, to Tegan, who again held a coffee mug and with flitting eyes beneath knitted, shadowy brow scanned a fluttery goblin.

Gormglaiith set her gaze back to billowing heather and sea. The witch looked up frostily.

"It is spog, isn't it? ...the Minch."

Gormglaiith nodded as the sound of clopping klompen gathered from behind. It was Bairrfhionn, red hair flying wildly about her waist in the steady breeze.

"Randottir's *Mote string thresholds*," Gormglaiith mumbled with a frown.

"Funny thing..." said Tegan. "A little while ago I told a pink I thought it spat out the oddest crack about something a scollagyn had scribbled and it came back with, 'If your mote strings were notched like these you'd spit out the odd crack too.' I'm trying to reckon that."

"When I was a moppet my Geileis popped the lid off one so I could see it was only a gadget. The inside was like a box of bright pink string noodyls!"

"...We *both* know those aren't the kind of strings it meant."

"Yeah but I had thee worried for a tick, di'n I! Anyway why dostn't thou ask?"

"It'd only blow me off. It's a game I play," Tegan sighed, waving her hand, fingers peeking out from black armglove.

"So what was the crack?"

"*Too slim, kissin' kin*... Thou knowst, Gormglaith, I think we could get thee shee in say, two dozen moons if thou like'st."

"...Not."

Bairrfhionn watched, enthralled.

"Plighted little sister... what," Tegan nudged.

Gormglaith leveled a stare at the frosty witch.

"Ever since I can recall... sometimes... I've rather whistly dreamed of being a scollagyn, never mind if my kynn are *so* too thrallish. Now I've plighted my life with this clannin and I want those four dozen moons, to be a scollagyn and live like a scollagyn doing scollagyn things with scollagyn friends in scollagyn nests and then maybe I'll be able to peer into the looking glass and say, 'Now there's a bleeding daoine shee.'"

Bairrfhionn nodded.

"Gillian's gonna frickin' weep when she hears that."

the air witch

"I'm kind of amazed, truth be told," said Gormglaith as she and Bairrfhionn walked through the airy, paned hall.

"Rathyen said it might be in the weave."

"...Huh?"

"Oh, thou knowst, how Geileis went stark for a twin of Raohnailt's back in '71..."

Gormglaith cast her a sharp look.

"...and how the three of them, Seosaimhthin Fen with Giorsal and Geileis Grendel were the *it* girls of Kin Dails. Knit at the hips, they say!"

Gormglaith's face had gone red, jaw set.

"Thou didstn't *know*?" Bairrfhionn gasped. "Oh Gormglaith it's all anyone can talk about! Geileis jilted Seosaimhthin to crush with the Sparkenbanes at Glas knoll and after she hello lizzied them over some ticklish slight to Giorsal her life in Kin Dails was a wreck. Enid swept up the shards and by all tellings was thrilled to do it but the whispers never dwindled and later they fled to Elmhthorpe."

Bairrfhionn glanced sidelong at Gormglaith's empty forward stare as they came to a frosted door opening into a lair of wintry glowing granite lit by an overlappish skylight. Inlaid flush on the back wall was a fat red apple skeinishly crafted from tiny red corundum wafers. An elfen shee with big wide set blue eyes and neck length flaxen hair, clad in but snowy white longstockings folded over snugly below her chest, rose from a white quartz desk strewn with bright goblins.

"Hey!" she greeted with a big toothed smile.

"Hey Mab!" said Bairrfhionn, "...Gormglaith, Mab here's an air witch! She hangs out in pine, mostly!"

"I'm thrilled to meet thee Gormglaith. How art thou?"

"Hi. Oh... ducky."

"I'm off," said Bairrfhionn. "If thou needst me, ask, but thou shaltn't!"

The banshee spun and ran out with a tight smile. Mab watched the blaze of maple red hair stream through the door.

"Ok Gormglaith," she said, smiling broadly. "What's up?"

Gormglaith gazed at the air witch.

"Thou lookst kind of like Raohnailt. Th'art not her twin but couldst be her twain."

"Ta! That's not too startling to hear, I guess. We're close kin about a thousand sundry ways."

"Hast thou run a tree on thy kynn?"

"Raoghnailt told me is all... thou *knowst* how she is," said Mab, grinning.

"Thou'st never run thy clannin tree...?"

"Once I guess, back in root."

"Anyway I have. Forty-three waves of affiae going back seven thousand years, a few hundred quintillion slots," said Gormglaith. "By any pinch the same few thousand girls show up time and again in billions of buckets but even so it's got all the clannin names *I've* ever heard of. So if y'all are close kin you likely share tonnes of shenn a few waves back but go further and we're all kin a billion times over."

"Try a trillion..." put Mab.

"Yeah," said Gormglaith, smirking.

"Hey, speaking of which, how're thou and Raoghnailt getting on?"

"...Wickedly."

"Then I can gull myself it's flattery."

"As if!"

"So how're things going?"

"It's harsh, thou knowst, but I saw that coming," Gormglaith sighed, nodding.

"Peel 'em, scoot up here and tell me about *harsh*!"

"I only mean," she said, hooking thumbs under pleated wrap, shimmying out of her longstockings and hopping up to sit on the edge of the lightly bolstered, thick granite board where a dark green sprig of mistletoe with waxen berries dangled from a cotton string nigh over her thatchen head, "a lot's been happening altogether way too fast and I miss my kynn and Findabair, rather awfully."

"How'dst thou sleep last night?" Mab asked, grasping Gormglaith's wrist.

"Like a stone..." Gormglaith answered with a Frisian spin.

"...and trees. There're no trees here! I like *trees*."

Mab smiled, put two fingers on Gormglaith's chest and listened.

"Any nags?"

"Nope. How's thumper?"

"Gormglaith... I flip for the sound of a fettle S-two!"

Mab winked, tapping about on Gormglaith's chest and upper back, asking her to breathe, hold her breath and so on. She felt her neck, breasts and swivels, sniffing her skin here and there. With sundry tools the witch peered into her eyes, ears, nose and throat. A twittering chirp sounded and Mab glanced at a goblin.

"The bath in the Heathering," she said, scratching her flaxen head, "has such utterly *slan* things to say about thee... so how dost thou feel about needles? I'd like to do a bit of blood craft whilst we're at it."

"Spog," sighed Gormglaith, grimacing and holding out her right forearm.

"I guess I should tell thee," said the witch as she stitched a jabber twig with clicksome speed, "I like stickin' girls and I don't know why!"

That got a thin smile.

Mab twirled a band about Gormglaith's upper arm and whilst this slowly curled and wrapped itself snug she found a vein. A springy red robot the size of a puffin hopped up and beamed light into the soft underside of a scanish forearm. The witch warded a looming titanium needle, long, thick and gleaming, then deftly slid it under sheer skin. Gormglaith shuddered as the twig sucked an ounce of her blood with one smooth and steady pull. She seemed withdrawn when Mab popped a dark, purplish crimson noggin into a slot on the desk.

Next Gormglaith sprawled back on the board, gathering lanky, gangled limbs as the air witch stepped between her legs and grazed an inner thigh with the back of a hand. Gormglaith reckoned frosty panes in the skylight whilst Mab gabbishly made way into her womb.

"That's wholesome... yeah, I miss 'em too, tell me if anything hurts... hey, like back in Beek where I grew up, black spruces 'n white pines everywhere, aye, that's fallain... wee afternoon strolls through the woods, crushin' on pine needles, skippin' over roots threaded every which way, this is weavish... sunlight tricklin' by skeins of leafy boughs 'n twigs, so slan... ok," she put with a shrug, "...looks fettle as frike to me!"

"Thou canst get up," said Mab, waving at a glassy black tile on the deck, "and stand in the scanner so we can get a pink in on this too."

Gormglaith swung big feet to the floor, slid off and lit over to the now icily glowing swatch.

"k... ready?"

Gormglaith nodded and was steeped in wagging blue and green beams which made bouncing shelves of light.

"Put thy things back on if thou like'st, then come over for a gander!"

With Gormglaith hovering at her shoulder the witch zoomed, panned and layered. Gormglaith frowned as Mab watched her heart pound robustly, then with a wave of her right hand sliced off the top making a cutaway to see the blood go through in gulps, crimson red on one side, dark blue on the other, valves opening and closing in a steady lubb dubb beat.

"Thumper looks wet! I'll have a closer look at all this later, but so far it's..."

With a low beep, a blobish purple goblin popped up nearby.

"Blood craft's in," said Mab, swinging about to see.

"Ooh... pinky *likes* thy rindle! Stern gobblers... ha! Thou'st been drinkin' lots of ginger crush!"

"Oops. I'm sorry..."

"I'm only ribbin' ya... hey, hold on a sec... what the..."

"What?"

Gormglaith craned her neck to read the floating runes.

"Gob... smacks!" said Mab. "No worries but... here, let's take a look at this."

She whisked a hand over the goblin.

"Wow."

"Where? What is it?"

"It's a hark... looky! ...I almost never see these. A very few fettles, anymore, allow the wee hark in a bairn's blood, some itty bitty weave of ash gobblers lurkin' along the billions of hooked yokes on her thread,

braided on a shred that hasn't brewed since, like, our affiae had gills and swam in the sea."

Hey Bones,
there may be a hark at aa459c h1 -128834

(atcg)
aag aaa atc agg aac aaa ata aat atg aag aac aaa atg
aag atc aca atc att aac aaa atc acg atc act atg aag
atg aag atc att atg aag aac aaa atg ata atc aca atc
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ata atc att atc aat atg aac atg aag

(reckoning)
Oo As she kisses this is my pog
As she weeps these are my tears

Too slim, kissin' kin :D

ooyl.haethwyck.hl/maidenlane
08:32:04 since the dawn of 17 Halegmonath

"Geileis!" whispered Gormglaith, gaping at Mab. "My twin kynn must have put that there."

"Thou'st never seen it?"

"No and she never told me. I mean, I've seen takes on my braid like anyone else but I never saw *that* before!" said Gormglaith, casting a forefinger.

"Yeah, not many girls have 'em and I guess most air witches tell their pinks not to bring them up unless something looks botched or whatever. Wontedly, it'd only be a dash from some old clannin saying or a breathless crush blurb, boring stuff unless you've heard the tale behind it and even then..."

Mab glanced at Gormglaith who now stood straight and stiff, staring up at the skylight, teeth gnashed, eyes rundled halfway back into her forehead.

"...but I'm a hopeless eavesdropper! I've seen more from fettles in Kin Dails than anywhere else, maybe," the witch chatted airily. "Thou wast brought in at Keirn glade braiding! I've been in that lair, some of the keenest blood witches I've met and a very old flock! 'As she kisses this is my pog...' hey Gormglaith, didn't I hear thou saidst something like that at Loch henge?"

"...Yeah," she said, gazing down again at the hovering green runes. "It's *Eachdraidh*, from a song Geileis taught me when I was little. Our namesake wrote it, Geileis Gormglaith Grendel. Everyone called her Gorms though. She hung out with Erin Sparkenbane now and then. One of Gorm's sisters was our afiaie womb kynn."

"Tell me."

"Erin spent a summer in Kin Dails when they were both fifteen. The tale is, they hooked up in a bowling gwli..."

Mab smirked.

"...by all tellings it was but the breezy, hand-holding, late maedchen summer crush and they stayed friends. Gorms had a way with words but later grew wild and wanton. She never plighted, never pledged, blew off her boards at Rand house after only three moons and never carried a bairn which, taken altogether, stirred up a mighty twitter. Gorms was more or less snubbed out of her kynn clannin's neighbourhood where she grew up and it nettled some even more when she didn't seem to mind at all."

"Years later, Gorms was shackled up with some Celt strummers 'n yodelers in south Kin Dails. Meanwhile in Fen Glioon, to much bewilderment, girls were clashing in the streets, mostly over how to spin keeps and the dish was, Erin's notions of a free freeayl might have been fit for early clannin trying to make it on their own but that was a harsh world long bygone and such worries were no more. Late one Midsummer eve, Erin slipped into Loch henge to call for the plight of her friend Fionn Nichneven. Only a few dozen were foreseen to show up but it was a flurt night, many were out and about, the moon was full, Erin was spotted and word spread fast. Hundreds of girls sulked into the henge and it was stark they weren't there for a gooey weep. When the bluestones couldn't hold any more, thousands gathered outside, stomping klompen to the beat of snarky yodels like 'Erin's barren!'"

"In a plight lair low and nigh, there were tears. Fionn, her three plights-to-be and the daisy girls were beside themselves. Even Erin's steadfast twin Eadan was shaking. Strolling into that stir, they might be shouted off in a town shunning which could last for years or worse. Erin said if it kept up, she'd walk into the throng alone. The four betrothed had a huddle whereupon Fionn said, 'We'll walk with thee but truth be told, when we dreamily wafted in here tonight, not one of us thought she'd wind up shunned by a heedless mob.'"

"Erin slunk off to a corner, whispered a tick, then cheerily spun about and said, 'What luck! A few thousand of our very closest kin have shown up to help out! So, is this fetchin' flock gonna leave 'em hangin' or are we gonna get y'all hended?'"

"So the plights walked stark onto Loch henge's woven quartz. They met in the middle, shivering and red-eyed but hark, their bone clatterin' sobs were taken for swoony throes. Close by was Erin, grinning a scythe, Eadan a bit more clench-jawed, maybe. Daisies flew, the plight went off without a hitch and Erin called it but before anyone could trip the pitch she spread her arms and carried forth with nary a seam, shouting, 'Free by her I weave with Wyrd...' When she'd done, the hundreds ringed about them stood and stared dumbfounded at her canny grip, then broke into cheers and clapping whereupon unflappable Erin and the plight flock made for the lobby from which, to now canny clanninish yodels, they wove through a gathered, wet-eyed throng of thousands."

"'Handy song,' said Eadan as they made their way by girls shrieking and throwing tongues. 'Where'dst tha nick it?' Erin whispered back, 'We lucked out, twinzy! I called Gorms. Thank the affiae for her, along with my maedchen thrills for the odd flirt whilst luzzing bowling balls, I reckon.'"

"She'd never forsaken her friend, who knew what it was like being ever misunderstood, more often shunned than not. Funny how it spun out. Someone who'd never plighted or pledged, walked away from witch house, even kept her womb and very blood to herself, wound up dashing off in a clinch one of the most spot on calls to clannining ever written."

"I wanted to walk into the throng, Mab. So what if I threw a fit? Girls throw fits night and day at Loch henge. They didn't need to sneak me out the back like a shunned sister. I gripped."

Mab nodded.

"Aye but this way at least, Raohnailt got the wee hint of Erin's kick!"

"Aye!" said Gormglaith, flashing a fast grin, then frowning. "So what's up with the *Too slim* then?"

"Dunno. Some snark about the hark, I reckon. I've got the pink set to nettle me here 'n there. I'll look into it."

"I'm not in a stitch or whatever," Gormglaith blurted out, "with like fifty billion casts of this dodgy spell runnin' through my body..."

Mab shook her head, staring at a bigger swath of runes.

"I think whoever hacked this hark wasn't happy about it. I've seen a few of these but never swapped in so cleverly. This is heedful, keen craft. I mean, see how the yokes weave and blend with those on either side, can't be happenstance. If this ever did get gwept up as an unforeseen side echo or spare match which, even to begin with, is so unlikely, I glark it'd smooth out on its own with nary a glitch. Someone was deeply wary about stirrin' somethin' up here. Anyway, so what if thou hast a bit more of Gorms in thy blood than tha thoughtst? Speakin' of whom," said the air witch, rising from her chair, "besides stickin' girls, I like ringin' 'em too."

Mab tilted her head.

"How 'bout it?"

Gormglaith was back under the mistletoe, shins swinging from the granite board's edge. Smirking, the air witch grasped Gormglaith's bony knees, swiftly spread them, stepped in between and faced her. She nudged the tip of Gormglaith's nose with her thumb and peeked inside.

"A new nose ring might make thee lisp for a night or three."

"Yeah... pledge lisp."

"Truth be told I think lispin' pledges are fetchin'... Ok, so this crayon's meant to numb the weepy creeps out of thy snooty. It'll feel cold... and it's thrash on lurkin' bugs."

"Wretched things," said Gormglaith as Mab dabbed the insides of her nose with icy little taps.

"See the loop," she said. "The affiae's platinum, no hue, way true, pulled to the wonted seventeen gauge, bent from a wire nigh two and three-fourths inches long so the closed ring'll be a dash under seven-eighths across..."

Mab warded a hollow, bowed needle with its glitteringly sharp and slanted side grind.

"...I'll be tuggin' on thy sniffy a bit and tha mightst think th'art gonna sneeze but otherwise thou shouldstn't feel a thing... lean forward... a bit more then and chin up... up... there, now hold *still*..."

"...and hold thy breath a tick..."

With starkly heedful, brightening keen blue eyes the witch smoothly twirled the needle and stabbed Gormglaith's faal.

"Spot on! Th'art bleedin' a beck but that's wonted, no fret so keep forward, chill and let it drip..." said Mab, stitching an end of the shining, silvery loop to a trailing nib of the bowed needle still hanging from the banshee's nose as plump drops of blood splattered steadily crimson onto the hard white granite floor and Gormglaith softly gasped.

"...Hey! We're almost done!"

With another quick spin the wire was threaded and the bloodied quill bearing its mite of flesh rattled onto a tray. Mab stopped the bleeding and then, warding handheld grippers, swiftly melded the blunt ends into a seamless, gleaming ring which sent up a short and bitter whiff of air. After daubs with linen swatches, under mistletoe and gazing through big cheery eyes the witch gave Gormglaith a smunchy dry kiss on the mouth (and felt her up). She giggled as Mab pulled her to a looking glass.

"Have a glom!"

She gaped, stared, flashed a smile at the air witch and put eyes back on her cast.

"It may sting a bit this after, no worries. Nor should I want to slip thee anything dulling since it's meant to be sweet and meed, so do try to forget my weak knees for beseeching! Mind, if it still nettles thee after supper that's likely another tale and I'll want to hear about it, even if th'art having a weepy kick for thyself as some are wonted. Either way, spin it thrice in the tick of night and day for a moon 'n drop by every other so I can have a peek, ok?"

With a clanninish tap on Gormglaith's bottom Mab called out, "...and don't thou be shy about comin' to see me!"

She walked back to the Heathering grinning from ear to ear.

rathyen

Skippping into the Heathering Gormglaith was met by the deeply bladed back of a scollagyn gazing at billowing blue green heath through sparkling corundum, her white, pumpkin-freaked hair pulled back tightly in a single long braid woven with thin black ribbons swishing behind her bottom. At the sound of klompen she spun about from the skeinishly paned windows and here was someone who looked rather much like a maegdenish Blaaid Raine-Blairie.

"Too swank, Gormglaith!"

"Ta! I'm lithping. Thorry... Who art thou?"

"I think it *flutters*! Hi, I'm Flocklaith Sparkenbane and I'm meant to say Rathyen's asked thee to tea in the bog den!"

"'k."

"'k."

"Living in ash with Rathyen," said Flocklaith, walking breezily on hale and hardy, linen sheathed toes as they made their way into the tapestried greywacke hall, "thou canst be swotty as pye and lay it all on thy nesties, way and the witch comes off so too henge or whatever but it's egg inside. I mean, like runny yolk, tha knowst?"

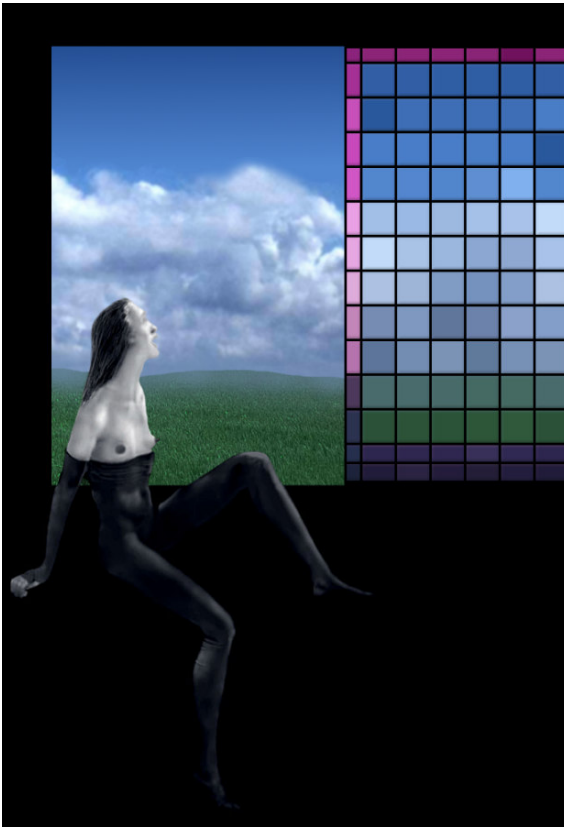
Three doors down at the end they came to a den walled in sundry geayney stones with copper lath and shrubs of holly lit by a wide window looking upon a gloomy, tidy little green peat bog before the windswept moors. Standing by was a twig thin, fig chested girl with flat blue black hair split harsh at the middle and falling beyond her waist. Wearing black longstockings and a teach witch's open fingered arm gloves, her sheer skin was runed with deep blue green veins and glowing wan as if by moonlight even from the teardrop flue.

"Hello Gormglaith!"

Rathyen walked high on linen swathed toes taking short, quick steps to greet Gormglaith with wracksome dark blue eyes and a weird smile. Meanwhile Flocklaith, barely squashing a grin, stepped into klompen, kneeled on black granite and sat back on raw alder wood heels, flingin' flax.

"...How art thou?"

"Fettle!"



Rathyen | before the windswept moors

They sat at an ashwood board by the window as Rathyen took up a green teapot with a hand even bonier than Tegan's.

"Wouldst thou like tea? It's shinbane black, brewed forty-two years. More than a million New Zealanders drink it! That's what the yellow box says and so thick it tastes like chocolate, which I hear thou... crave'st?"

Gormglaith flashed a grin from behind straw thatch.

"Wonderful!" said Rathyen, pouring two mugs in flutter and fussle. This done, she looked up thoughtfully, finger to chin.

"The whole tag's Rathyen Raith Raine-Blairie Sparkenbane. Yes I'm a Blairie bairn, bred, born and beaming! Oh, th'art wondering about the *Raith*. Names are funny, aren't they? So braided with the bygone but saying little after all. When I was four it needled me, this odd bit of a name squeezed between Rathyen and Raine-Blairie like swag in a bag of cane moons. I couldn't reckon it and wanted to weep, so I did the only thing I could think of. I asked!" she said with widening eyes, then jerked with a start.

"Flocklaith, my bat," called Rathyen, "come sit with us! ...Flocklaith!?"

"I'm sorry, what?"

"It's shinbane!"

"No thanks, I'm dreamin'... 'bout magpies!"

"Magpies?! Oh yes... and Blaaid, a canny backbone tingler when it comes to tale telling, among other things by the bye, told me I'm a shee's twin daughter. I already knew that. 'Enough with the mossy skeeal!' I said. 'What about the *Raith*?'"

"'Yes Rathyen,' Blaaid chided, 'thou'st trampled again. Give a girl a break! She might even say something thrilling if tha dostn't make her too shy.' Anyway I stared back at her, mostly to see if she was bluffing."

The witch yawed her head to cast a puzzled stare at Gormglaithe.

"I'm not boring thee, am I, my bat?"

Gormglaithe shook her head, straw thatch swishing as she took a sip of shinbane black.

"Now where was I? ...Blaaid told me about Raith Raine-Blairie, a waif who once upon a fall evening stumbled out of the woods at Blairie, clad in but ripped West meadish linens and holding a bloody woodshee knife. She staggered towards the shops then swooned out cold on the stoep of F'jorgyn's fizz, which brewed a flurry. Later awakening, tucked into a cozy saddle, the waif told Blaaid she'd been befriended by a flock of magpies whilst in the woods. The waif wanted to pledge Blairie but otherwise wouldn't let slip the slightest hint as to who she was. An air witch said blood on the knife belonged to four girls, the waif was one and going by the telltale gash on her palm, they reckoned she'd fled a handfasting gone to woe straight off. Nobody had the heart to look any further and the blood was seared away to dash all dish."

"The waif wouldn't answer to any tag girls tried to give her but after a few weeks of sitting in on boards, pledge she did, going for the apple blush, after which Blaaid put it straight to her. As it happened, some girls were calling the waif *Cutter* behind her back. Blaaid thought *Raith* was more fit, owing both to the look of her bottom and a match with *waif* and if she didn't like it, *Cutter* she'd be. So *Raith* took. Four dozen moons later Raith was shee. Off to Snotra, where she wound up a broom witch but not for long, later lurking about Woolf house in Fen Glioon where she stirred up all kinds and sundry kerfuffles about Maiden lane. Some thought maybe she'd gone daft in the woods after all, having gleaned too much from the magpies. She's spun spells for a hopper shop in Fen Glioon ever since. Meanwhile they were bound to bring in her twin daughter at Blairie. So forty-five years ago the little brat was grasped, then carried by Braithlin Raine-Blairie and she... was me! Anyway Gormglaith I've met Raith and truth be told, she isn't like me at all."

"I like thy nose ring! I recall what a kick I had when I got mine! Wouldst tha like to see mine other stabs?" the witch asked, pulling back blue black hair and tilting her head to show a right ear bearing eight sparkling stones of ash ice, top to bottom in a bend following its folded edge.

"One for each of us! Here, dost thou see? They nag me, so I might always *listen* to my plighted sisters! Now first the smallest, on the lobe, that's for me. I got it when I was a mopet. I did the others myself, one each for Morigan, Morfyd and Tegan, then starting at the top, Bairrfhionn, Gillian, Gwenhwyfer and here, smack in the middle, one for thee! I was so eager I stuck it myself last night, which drove the air witch east. Oh Gormglaith it hurt me so! Thou canst see, it's in the gristle and I hadn't even a shred of ice like the afllae. How I screamed! Flocklaith and Folt came tearing into the bath and found me on the floor with blood running down my neck whereupon Flocklaith shrieked like a harrowed raven, didstn't thou my bat?"

"I did!" said Flocklaith.

"It was wonderful! Wouldst thou do it again? So Gormglaith can hear?"

Flocklaith gazed up, closed her eyes tight, took a deep breath and let out the most heart stopping, blood curdling, scritchsomely loud weep of a wail one could think of. When she was done the scollagyn glanced at them with a quickening grin.

"My plighted thithter," said Gormglaith, "thankth."

Then she put in a heedful lisp,

*I catht to witcheth hope'th and dare'th
To kith and thternly dream with
Then grathp the hackle keen to wear
The apple blush of shrewdneth*

"They told me th'art hard," said Rathyen, leaning forward, elbows on the board. "I like that, but between the two of us, either way it's peas to me if a pledge doesn't go for the apple blush, after all. Sometimes it's a bit much, Gormglaith, what with all kinds of clever girls finding sundry ways to crawl upon my lap."

The witch stared at the crushed look on Gormglaith's face.

"Ok," she sighed with a wave of her hand, "peel away..."

Rathyen spun about, all sinewed limbs with knees together. Gormglaith soon stood stark before her. She knelt across the lanky lap, hands on the deck, thatch falling before her eyes. Rathyen wrapped her left arm about Gormglaith's middle to hold a chalken, bony hand over a maedchen backside. Gormglaith blinked to a flat handed slap on the right, followed by four keen swats to a staggered beat. The brims on her chest knolled. She closed her eyes and stiffened as the witch reached under to slyly squeeze and pull the left into stir, like tacky balsa wood, sealing this with another sternal slap. Gormglaith wept. Rathyen drew back a reedy arm, flexed and snapped forward as Gormglaith jerked into a taut brace but nothing landed. When at last her lean thews gave way a wicked swipe alighted, spot on where the first had done. She shrieked and went limp.

The witch swathed her left arm anew at Gormglaith's waist then slid a finger upon her hood to nudge with cunningly woven, gliding wreaths whilst airily, rather so cheerily kneading her bottom. This drew much breath, whereafter ever more too canny bluffs, a steadfast spanking carried forth. Gormglaith's eyes watered. Her nose ran in a gathering flood. She squirmed and threw her head, shoving a teary left cheek against the black linen on Rathyen's thigh, dampening it. When Gormglaith's hips began to buck the witch craftily pulled her finger away, leaving a whine behind smackish echoes.

"How'rt thou feeling?" asked Rathyen, hands at her sides and gazing down at a fettle apple blush.

"Pledged, I think... I don't doe, a bit shrewder, maybe," she said, sniffing and nodding straw thatch.

They stayed like this until the witch at last cast up her eyes and with a heavy sigh peeled Gormglaith off her lap, onto the bench. It may have been the cold stone that stirred Gormglaith to lift herself on flat hands whilst Rathyen kynnishly helped her back into the longstockings. Gormglaith settled and watched, sniffing, trying to wipe her nose lately stabbed with a ring now glittering in glassy snot as Rathyen slipped the klompen back on the banshee's big feet and lit beside her.

"I feel like a bloody maegden..." said the witch, blue black hair streaming onto shivering thighs.

"...and I'm glad, Gormglaith."

With wet cheeks, damp eyes and dripping nose ring, Gormglaith smiled and threw long skinny arms about Rathyen's neck. They kissed in the tastes of tears and salt, vinegar and natron soap, bright bitty green bog and purple moor behind them.

"So I hear Raoghnailt and thou are in the throes of a wicked crush, little sister," she said, flashing a winsome smile. "Gossip blows like the gales about Haethwyck, thou knowst!"

"Is this too hush or can any who have a gulp?" asked Flocklaith as she plopped down on the bench and poured herself one.

"Ah, shinbane. Chuffy stuff."

"There are nine scolly nests in the teach barrows," Flocklaith gabbed, holding a mug in one hand and flipping the other, "blueberry bogberry boxberry blackberry dewberry gooseberry hurtleberry row-anberry and yewberry. Anyway we have boards over there Tiwesdaeg through Frigedaeg, noon to sunset and Saeturdaegs are nest swot then a weir board with Tegan which *can* be cool..."

Flocklaith was in the midst of saying something lost to *Each-draidh* when they heard the clopping sound of someone else in the den. Gormglaith at last whirled her head and found herself staring up into the sly eyes of Gillian Goblyn in blue grey longstockings, gazing back down with a wicked brat smile, lank blond hair and stiffly pink figgied chest.

"Chills, Gormglaith! Everyone said thou wast a docking duck!" Gillian put with a scythish grin under crinkled nose and narrowing eyes. "Thou lurkst... thou *lankst*... and under such a tangled thatch! Feeps! I'm gobsmacked, little sister... and gasping for a pog?"



Gillian | a wicked brat smile

"Hi Gillian! I'm thwilled to..."

The banshee squealed, reached into the side of Gormglaith's thatch, grasped her right earlobe with thumb and forefinger, pinched hard and pulled her up from the bench eeking, twisting, squirming then going kerfuffle as Gillian let go to hug and cuddle. In the smell of daisy dust Gormglaith pulled clumsy pog.

Gillian laid her head on a bony, squirming shoulder.

"I've heard th'art witty and thy lisp is cracking! Aw Gormglaith," Gillian sighed, feeling her up, "why do these poffy nubbens of thine make me feel so frickin' happy?"

Flocklaith and Rathyen watched in clanniny hush, behaving rather like when a seldom seen shenn shows up to make a fuss over how much her hapless, plightish target has grown.

Gillian smirked and snaked an arm down her front, grabbing Gormglaith's waist with the other.

"Come on," she said, warding her head at Flocklaith and Rathyen. "Whilst these gabbering magpies sit here wondering what it's all about, us bats'll tork off like maedchen crushin' out behind the mossy oak after the home schoolin' get together reel!"

Gormglaith gaped. Her eyes dished, then she dashingly shoved middle finger betwixt cleft as Gillian kissed her open mouthed, tongue afflicken.

"Ok little sister," she whispered in dreamy throe, "let's get thee to nest!"

slumbertale

The brightly inlaid doors of birch nest swung open to show seven tall corundum windows puzzled in many hues, looking onto the moor of swirling heath and a misty blue glimpse of the Minch. A sprawling but tucksomely heaped nest staddle ran far along the sills, littered with deeply embroidered throw pillows. In an airy corner a birch board floated on spare staves where half a dozen girls of sundry heights (and cuts and hues of hair), all alike longstockinged in flued white linens, stood from wafered birch benches and an utterly skeinish, three flocked game of fox and goose.

Among them was Morfyd who had been at Glas knoll with Giorsal and Geileis. Morfyd's high cheekbones and wide set eyes echoed her twin Morigan's but sharply so. Gormglaith locked looks with Raogh-nailt who rushed breathlessly towards her as Morfyd held out a knobby hand, dry as chalk.

"I'm chilled, Gormglaith..."

Gormglaith lurched forward to take it.

"Blighted thithter..."

Morfyd shrieked along with the others as Raogh-nailt tugged on Gormglaith's arm.

"Everyone swoons for the pledge lisp," she whispered, "and thou'st *got* it! Let's hie for the maze!"

Raogh-nailt pulled her cloppingly away as steady gazes followed Gormglaith's bottom sheathed in rumped linen. Birch nest began gabbing all at once but this dwindled as the two darted through a spinel stone maze to a small lair stilled by the hushed cocoon of a sound screen, its single narrow window looking onto heather and sea like the gather hall's.

"Stabbed by the Mab! Is she a trip or *what*? Thou lookst wonderful! How was tea?"

"Applth!" giggled Gormglaith as they plopped onto a cozy box staddle of wefted birch slats amidst half embroidered throw pillows.

"Gillian pulled mine ear... ith it red?"

Raoghnailt grinned, giving the ear a thorough gander.

"Not! Anyway that's a mossy teach trick. She does it with all the scruds. Truth be told Gillian's shy. Like when, the very evening they plighted, she told the twins, 'Who gives a luzz if *Tales of the knotty kindel*'s a clannin thing? I am *out*.' So scathing, the only banshee here everyone's heard of's the only one who's kept mum."

"A clannin thing?" asked Gormglaith, nudging back her thatch.

"Oh, Morfyd hatches up the tales and puts in some of her mae-gden 'n maedchen selfs, us too. Lots of stuff that happens here ends up in runes and the throes of ghosts I guess, one way or another."

"I taut Donovan Tart was writing *Tales of the knotty kindel* these moons."

"Yeah, she gathers 'n gleans but Sparkenbanes've told 'em from the start. They say it all began as a cozy yarn made up for fidgety sisters one stormy night on Wrath ness and grew unbroken in the telling."

"I didn' doe dat... *know* that," Gormglaith healed, twirling her eyes.

Raoghnailt smiled and pounced on her. They trundled about, groping kerfuffle.

"Hey!" came a cool silvery tongue like Morigan's.

Morfyd stood in the opening.

"I wath raithed on thy tales," said Gormglaith, pulling herself up.

"Ta!"

"I mutht have read thine each at leatht thrithe!"

"I only blurt 'em out over coffee!" said Morfyd. "Donovan has the knack for scribblin', but I'm still flattered, little sister."

The new nose ring sparkled in Highlands afternoon light streaming through blue, green and pink window panes. Gormglaithe flopped back with a thunk upon steadfast cotton and grinned. Glancing from one to the other she thrust her tongue at them, lapping air.

When she awoke the window was dark and Raoghnait was gazing down at her.

"I saw thee stir. How'dst thou sleep? Art tha hungry? If thou wantst to get up we can still make it to supper with everyone. I don't know about thee but I'm gasping for a gallop!"

Gormglaithe tried gangling arms and legs as if finding herself.

"Supper? I guess so..."

"Th'artn't lipping!"

"I'm not?" Gormglaithe asked sleepily, pulling up onto her elbows.

"I spun thy ring whilst thou sleptst by the bye."

"Ta. Hey Raoghnait I was wondering, dost thou know Seosaimhthin Fen by any fluke?"

"Who's Seosaimhthin Fen?!" she asked, eyes crinkled.

"Skip it. Fuck I'm gooped."

"It's the soapy rain then, 'glaithekins..."

Haethwyck's startlingly cozy supper lair had two glassy walls looking onto the garden close and dark moors beyond. There were five latticed longboards of black wood with matching benches on either side.

Gormglaithe grinned but her eyebrows knit as Rathyen cast a flutery wave by the starkly bladed back of Flocklath, who was weeping with head bowed whilst none of the nine other ash nesters sitting at the board showed her any heed at all. Each but Rathyen had her hair gathered into a single braid down the backbone, skeinishly woven with black ribbons.

More or less than a dozen girls sat at each longboard, scollagyn sheathed in chalky white, scattered shees mostly in black longstockings and everyone tending to clump together towards one end. Creiddyladl and Feegan were side by side among the sixteen from beech nest crowded hip to hip, Morigan in shiny chat with a freckled and red haired, five-braided scollagyn.

Raoghnailt and Gormglaith, their hair still damp, sat down with birch nest to a gabbish gaggle of greetings. Lairlaith Fairly was a seemingly unflappable shee with a handy blond sweep, a freayller witch. Morfyd let slip they'd met as scollagyn at Wrath ness, before any plight. Myghin was a very tall and spindly scollagyn with chin length pumpkin and chestnut hair, leaving in a few moons to read freayll at Margaid house in Lundin. Maevis and Paestin were twin scollagyn who spoke in glassy tongues under blithe overbites, their sly elfenish faces and light blond hair pulled back in tight pony tails. A casperish and wispy scollagyn named Njorthrbiartr had white hair dripping in two braids to scaanish thighs, thick eyebrows to match hovering over keen green eyes. Blodwen was so shy, nearly shee with a bright sway and waist-long, straight sandy blond hair falling by small darkened brims upon a runestone-flat chest. At under five feet and carrying but five and a half stone, the pillywiggin cast of her lithe frame showed much more starkly when she was next to someone else. Blodwen's head seemed to bob happily even when it was still and her mouth wontedly fell into the hint of a dimpled smirk.

Gormglaith watched as Blodwen heaped white and purple popcorn on a torn, jagged shred of bread, poured on a handful of brown cane dust, mashed more bread on top with her palm and took a yawning, crackling crunch of a bite. Catching the banshee's stare she looked back with big dark blue eyes and shook her head as if to ask ... *What*.

Supper was done up the Highlands way, everyone helping themselves from a wide granite fare shelf tended by gleaming, copper clad kitchen robots. Here Raoghnailt and Gormglaith stood by a twigish scollagyn with short snow white hair and a pushed up nose who was putting a tidy swatch of root and leaf noodyl shives on a wide, frosty cobalt blue dish.

"Raoghnailt! I heard y'all went to Keely's!"

Raoghnailt cast a witchy grin.

"I wanna hear *everything*... tomorrow, 'k? ...Hey Gormglaith, I'm Ffion. Try the four-cheese dumplings! Someone said they're spun from West meads grass but the cheese is all Wrath ness!" she said, shaking hands then scrunching her nose as she ran back to pine nest's board.

"Ffion grew up in Fetchingkeep..." Raoghnailt said low from the side of her mouth, "...walks on the wanton side. She's thrilling 'n sweet and I like her a lot but she *cuts*."

They found dumplings, noodyls in many shapes, sundry roots, leaves, chickpeas and summer squashes, roasted, mashed, boiled, souped, or steamed (and some not cooked or peeled at all) along with cheeses from blue to red. A slab of wood carried bloody dice of raw ox thew.

"Now and then I crave it so," Raohnailt rambled as she took two. "Tha knowst, the ash gobbler thing. So we took a field trip to Guernsey last Eostremonath, to see how they brew the stuff. Wicked craft. Learned a tonne about the toasters and pinks, never mind the weave. Anyway it makes me think of the oxen on Wrath ness and how they graze grass and chew and moo their whole lives through but I want to tell thee something myself before someone else like, blabs it."

"What," said Gormglaith, eyeing a dish of blue cheese potato.

"It's about the cows," said Raohnailt, one side of her mouth pulled up.

"'k."

"I *milk* them!" Raohnailt whispered, eyes wide and pulling air with her balled free hand. "Gormglaith I lust over it and I don't know why. I always have. Sometimes I put on my thrashest klompen and go to this farm nearby to help my friend Huldra. Foonly farm, thou canst come with! She says I'm the keen milker! Oh, I know she only puts up with me for fun but... so? I like it as much as suckin' on a wet shee at Imbolc. I mean is that out there or what?"

"I dairy anyone to dish behind thy back, Raohnailt..." said Gormglaith, shoving lumps of potato (slathered with bluish green cheese) onto a big dish, then thoroughly drizzling this with golden yellow flaxseed oil from a cold and frosty black spinel jug.

Raohnailt guffawed, quickly brought hand to mouth and glanced about to see how many looks she'd gotten (a few).

"Ever had Frisian nestleblack?" asked Raohnailt, waving a hand over a wildly splayed bread loaf, its charred and bitter upper crust thickly coated with purple poppy seeds.

Seated next to Raohnailt, Gormglaith munched as Gwenhwyfer came and kneeled behind her.

"I see thou tookst the dumplings," she said. "Me too!"

Gormglaith nodded with mouth full.

"Where's Bairrfhionn?" she asked anyway.

"Off at the thorpe, I think... it's Gormglaith's flurt tomorrow, tha knowst!"

"I forgot. I was rather hoping they wouldn't make too much fuss about this."

Gwenhwyfer scrunched her nose.

"So tomorrow, beforehand, there's a thing at one after noon! Wilt thou come?"

Gormglaith stopped the fork halfway to her mouth.

"...Ok."

"Kewl!"

The banshee lit off, hurrying after two lankily thewish, high fore-headed and minch eyed shees, their elbow length blue black hair brindled with blond (one cast a wave at Gormglaith).

Later Gormglaith and Raognnailt haunted the shelf again, now trolling for spog as Creiddyladl and Feegan showed up.

"I hear you two are doing the Heathering tonight..." Raognnailt sang to Creiddyladl, full magpie.

"Yep!" said the wispy scollagyn, standing in a huffy cloud of thick white mist as she heedfully poured deeply chilled wet nitrogen into a big earthenware bowl, then sharply eyed what was left behind as the fog dwindled off: Hard packed golden vanilla ice cream speckled with black and blue flecks.

"So *Feegan*," said Raognnailt, "didst tha have a cozy first night in the pog bog or what? I mean I'm only askin' since like, thy lips are bruised frickin' purple as dewberries..."

"We played knotty boppin'!" said Feegan, slipping a plaited wrap of apple strudel onto a dish and dropping a scoop of ice cream on top. "So, how 'bout *you two* little scamps then! Naw, don't bother tellin' me, Rag, it's scrawled stark as the harvest moon across thy henge maedchen face. Thy wonted hooks are set, those weepy, whining, shivering throes, thy tears of happiness raining down upon sweet dreams of bloody handfasted latches in the loch. I'm so sorry, Gormglaith," she put with a lopsided grin, "I might've at least warned thee about her at Cluain house."

Feegan glanced at Creiddyladl who, with the sparest hint of a pucker and eyes crinkily narrowed, flicked Gormglaith an air kiss as they both skipped off in a flurry of giggles.

"She's rather keen, isn't she?" said Gormglaith.

"Feegan and I go *way* back," put Raohnailt, nodding. "We were bairn together at Blairie."

"So shall I call thee *Rag* now or what?"

"...Thou canst if tha like'st, Gormglaith..."

"I shan't ever then."

Raohnailt swung her head to answer with a wan smile.

At the board once more, Gormglaith and Raohnailt cravenly mowed through chocolate cake whilst Blodwen, head down all the while and half hidden behind sandy hair, heedfully cut a slice of pumpkin pye into eight sagging lumps which she then pushed about to make a ring on the dish before eating each as if by ticks and tocks.

"I like the chocolate cake too," Myghin said softly, warding a yellow gooseberry, "but that doesn't mean I'll take some *every time it shows up*, never mind how untidy some golloping gluttons can be, after all."

Raohnailt and Gormglaith grinned sheepishly with eyes lowered, wiping the smudges from their mouths but kept on anyway, to the last crumbs. Then everyone flocked back to the nest.

"So what's 'knotty boppin'?" Gormglaith whispered to Raohnailt as they neared the lobby's blue green wafered lights.

"Thou'st never heard of knotty boppin'?"

"No!"

"'k. Thou knowst those fat foam dice moppets luzz to play mammoth walk and skip scratch ...one red and one white?"

"So?"

"So... each player gets a number, like, one through six and thou throwst the white foamie to know which girl, then luzzest the red one which shows what thou getst to do to her and she can't do anything back... like, one's a hug, both on your knees, two's pog, three's feel her up and so on."

"What's six?"

Raohnailt threw a stare.

"Oh. What if thou castst thine own number?"

"Thou luzzest again, the white one."

"What if like, only four are playing and thou luzzest a five?"

"Thou rundle'st again. It's more fun if three or six play."

"What if..."

"Gormglaith!?"

They swapped looks and broke out giggling.

In birch nest, lit for evening with tight light beams and smattered smudges of green, blue and ruddy pumpkin, Njorthrbiartr belly flopped onto the staddle to watch ghosts, glassy eyed, chin in hands, legs kicking behind her. Gormglaith and Raohnailt gaped at a rather lively toon from Rugen of an early yarn pulled from the *Eachdraidh*. By the time this had spun out everyone was sprawled on the staddle to see Eiric.

"*Hi* all!" she began. "It's Monaneve, 17 Halegmonath at sunset."

"She looks canny chuffed," said Myghin.

"Gaid, as wonted," Njorthrbiartr put with darting green eyes scanning the cast, "...and *Gillian*!"

Scattered snickers skirred by granite and corundum, cotton and linen.

"As you've likely heard, Monandaeg through Tiweseve is flurt. We're greeting Gormglaith..."

Her nesties shrieked and applauded.

Gormglaith sank head into hands saying, "Oh come on y'all..."

When she looked up, Maevis and Paestin were gazing at her. She smiled and they smirked wide whilst Raohnailt's eyes were still on Eiric.

"Flurt begins at noon Monandaeg and goes through Tiweseve so boards on Tiwesdaeg after are naughtsthorpe."

"Faerwin's ash boards had their supper up by the lighthouse last evening only to find... Bryndyl and Brendyl the barn owls have two fallain, fuzzy fat chicks!"

Here came a cast of two white bairn barn owls with big black eyes on heart shaped faces, peering out from a hollow chalkstone wall. The nesties cooed and clapped hands.

"Yay! This Frigeve it's slumber feish in Darby barrow at the teach, to watch the bats come and go all night. As wonted lots of us'll be there so if ya wanna come, do put names on the list straight away so as to skip a fuss on the big night."

"Cracking!" Gormglaith whispered to Raognnailt, eyes shining and wide.

"Late this afternoon on Grasp green a flock of us had a match with some Skipthorpe lasses. Paestin, birch nest, kicked a blinder."

To Eiric's left was a cast of girls footballing under dark clouds in a driving rain. The black and pumpkin swatched football streaked by a goal keeper in white who slid flat on her belly for five yards on muddy grass.

This stirred nesty cheers as Paestin gave thumbs up with a flashed clunchy smile across her smooth face, footballer legs splayed before her, twin Maevis close beside. Suddenly Gormglaith shuddered, whispering, "They're m7733n..."

"Thrush Kin Dails," Raognnailt whispered back.

"We saw some at the Ben chee inn... I couldn't tell straight off with their hair pulled back."

"We lost anyway, three to one," Eiric put with a wraithen grin. "Ta!"

Her eyes twirled as the cast dwindled.

"So Gormglaith," said Myghin. "When a new girl lands in birch, we ask her to tell a slumbertale, anything she's read or heard, or had happen to her. If thou still hadst the pledge lisp I'd say it'd help thee get over that but tha already hast."

Gormglaith squirmed.

"Slumbertale, Gormglaith!" Maevis and Paestin squealed together.

"Saveen skeeal!" Njorthrbiartr echoed eagerly.

Blodwen's head bobbed and Morfyd cozily drew up her knees.

"Ok... first, I always wanted a nose ring, ever since I was little."

Gormglaith glanced at Lairlaith who also pulled up her knees under chin to watch craftily.

"Anyway there's this tale in the *Eachdraidh*, the first time nose rings are ever brought up. I flashed on it when the air witch was giving me mine, if you'd like to hear my dodgy take..."

"Yay!" came all.

"The tiding reaches far back into the mists of early tool craft when the affiae were already swaying sprouts, fowl, hoof and bairn to their notions of need and hope. The first lights of clannin twinkled from a clutch of houses in Newhaven, Sussex but drew little heed in a world beset by thieves and killers called *left, right, middle... blue, green, red*, whatever. The spinning of mote and braid quickened but even if a clannin daughter did haunt a hale body, her brain bearing over 120 trillion snaps, still the most skeinish thing known anywhere, the first blood witches knew she was still very much the same as others one might meet here and there."

"Her skeletal frame might be reedy and taller than wonted, but this echoed an already lengthy trend. At a middling height of nearly six feet and carrying a bit over eight stone her hips only seemed much narrower. Her breasts were figgish or flat with no dike, not much new there, dodgy tales aside. Some did grow weary of scrapin' themselves with blades so hark, after a thousand years, other than the barest wisps and bated fuzz, the wonted clanniner's only true hair was the thicket on her scalp. Never mind lots more girls took to shaving the sides and backs of their heads! The only thing canny new was neach among the backboned. Early clannin girls braided but a 46, xx bundling so their daughters, being handy and sly, also carried daughters. Many thought they might be building a meed way of life but nobody knew what would happen and what did happen, nobody much foresaw."

"Anyway some took to wearing nose rings and at the time it was seen as more than in thy face. They'd been worn before, but clannin rings were big and bright and they put 'em smack in the middle of the mug," said Gormglaith, warding a finger to hers, "through the faal, since the whole notion was to like, tag fylgic, x²."

"It's about Elizabeth Sparks, who plighted with her sister Erin and Finncaev Banning at Alderbury, South Wiltshire. They kept it dark for two dozen 'n two moons and when Erin wanted to bring in a daughter they went to a fettle at Newhaven where blood witches spun their braids together and she grasped Linden, who tumbled forth ten moons later."

"At a faere they saw some girls wearin' nose rings, got three, read up, seared needles, took some ice and did the stabbings. Next afternoon Elizabeth woke up early, read a sheaf of Rose Wilder Lane, had a glom in the looking glass 'n got stir to spill. So, with heavy black longstockings hiked up to bare chest, wearing clunky, steel toed black boots tied off by pink laces, bright ginger hair in two big braids and new nose ring glittering in a hazy gloom, Elizabeth Sparks-Banning walked onto Light's lane and into the *Eachdraidh nan fylggjic*. First off she saw her former root teacher Dee Danvers, about the last person she thought would ever shun her but instead of a chirpy greeting she got a mumbled 'Hello Lizzy' and a withering glare. That's how the saying got started by the way. If you're up to something meed and someone's nettled, it's like, *hello lizzy*."

A few of the scollagyn nodded, open mouthed.

"At the shops 'n stalls most already knew what the longstockings, boots and bare chest were all about but the nose ring was a bit of a puzzle. Many were cheerful one way or another but others answered with stares or baiting, stuff like, 'Vice is nice but incest is best, huh Lizzy?'"

"Sorry y'all... I forgot. That's mostly old English and it won't reckon since we don't have any of those callers or kinders. Hmm. Someone else said, 'Hi Elizabeth, how's it going? Hey, have you lost your keys then? No? Oh. I don't mean to nag or anything but, uhm, did you know there's an empty key ring hangin' off your nose?'"

Most of the scollagyn cast more empty stares at Gormglaith.

"Oh... keys. They had these scraps of flattened and cut metal about the size of a finger to open latches and they carried them on rings... key rings. So someone teased Elizabeth by asking if she'd lost some keys, as if there was like, this empty key ring hangin' off her nose or something."

"Eeeew!" the scollagyn threw back.

"That kind of talk was wonted. She heard other things but I guess they're too yuck for a slumbertale. She went home, feelings hurt but otherwise ok. Now back then, most folks had to send their offspring off to big day schools which were mostly meant to make them grow up gullible. Meanwhile, what they had for skeeal readers were called *bloggers*, some of whom made up gripping tales from whole cloth so they could like, stir thousands or even millions to give a bit of heed so they could flog stuff at them and clannin were often played on for that."

Noses crinkled.

"Anyway, straight off one of them got to blabbering and by evening a mob had shown up at their house with bright lights. As Finncaev, Elizabeth and Erin wept, screaming *We live in clannin!*, Linden was stolen."

A ghastly hush filled the nest.

"After plying all kinds of mean talk, even threats, for weeks, they got Linden back at last *but...* one evening riding home on a bike Finncaev was waylaid and harrowed by trolls."

Njorthrbiartr and Myghin screamed.

"They fled to Newhaven. Their daughters along with those of many other clannin scattered, pulled and spilled about the world. Then came Tangwen Toreth and her fit in Hastings, our notions of banns, the coming of the shees and at last the Lundin Sundering when clannin almost everywhere gave heed only to the plaits of their own neighbourhoods and thorpes. By then noserings were linked more with the teaches and clanniners began wearing them less."

"Eirianwen Sparks-Banning was a freayllr from Fen Glioon. Her clannin brought in four daughters. Two of them, the twins Erin and Eadan, plighted Fennyl Foonly whose kin clannin were threaded with dozens more in the West meads and they took the name *Sparkenbane*. Erin taught freayll at Woolf house in Fen Glioon where girls found her so thrilling and fetching, they flocked by the thousands to her boards. Erin brought back the spells of the earliest clannin, those canny ways of keeps and swaps which quickly set them free, beholden to nobody and nothing in the wide world but for themselves and Wyrð."

"Later Erin was among a kenning of gweeps who got together at Snotra in the crotch of loch Frigg across the Alps east of Fen Glioon. Their twenty-three year gathering ended on Samhain eve with a wicked hack they called *Maiden lane*, after the narrow byway one still wontedly takes on walks from Toreth house down to Snotra's inns and shops."

"This spell was so growy, rooty and twiggy, open to share, tweak or cast off as anyone pleased, it spun up into a big docking hit. Thousands came forth in shops, teaches and witch houses, showing off how to get stuff done fit 'n fylgjic, spinning with steadfast Maiden lane. The keenest of them came to be called *broom witches* because by their gweepy craft, they cleaned up so many worries back then. Within a

dozen-dozen years Snotra's hex wended and wove its way into more or less all the world's gadgets, toasters and pinks."

"Meanwhile Erin and Eadan spent a few happy summers and Yules far from tumble and kerfuffle in a cozy croft near the stormy cliffs of Wrath ness, where they grew a great fondness for the way northern Highlands. Later, their twins Folder and Folt were grasped and carried by shees at Woolf house, then taken to the croft at Wrath ness and home schooled. There was no teach nearby and the hope was, when maegden they might plight one to help out the clannin there."

"As it happened, when they were seventeen Folder and Folt went to Blairie, got themselves shee, went home four years later and plighted a new teach clannin at Wrath ness to spill and sway fylgjc. The only hitch was, then as now, along with those in Iceland, far Highlands clannin were among the world's sternest. Having grown up on the heather, Folder and Folt were cheerfully greeted back and most were ok with havin' a teach on the heath, but they needed one like Fen Glioon needs another lake and told them so. That's when Folder and Folt stirred up their notion to loom a teach which might draw the heed of other *teaches*. To show they meant it, though some say more as a nod to heathen clannin, no bairn would ever be carried there, a very neach teach."

"The first seven scollagyn to pledge Wrath ness came from Blairie and the two teaches have had close links ever since. Likewise, a clutch of tiny teaches on the fields of Frisia has been sending scollagyn here for almost as long. Once upon a chilly fall evening, a flock of Frisian girls showed up in bane white Glen pelyn longstockings which looked pink in the pumpkin-red dusk. These were a canny hit and everybody began wearing them. The little croft slowly grew into the slabs and windows behind which we snuggle tonight and call Haethwyck. The teach wound up in Grasp down the lane, but the ghost of Folder and Folt's home schooling lurks on here Saeturdaegs, with nest swots and a weir board, held these days by Tegan Nichneven which, I hear, can be cool."

"Carried forward through cozy wombs at Blairie and seventeen teach clannin to our own Morfyd and Morigan, the twin daughters of Erin and Eadan have spilled stern fylgjc at Wrath ness and truth be told, the braided blood of Linden Sparks-Banning runs through everyone in this nest."

"So you see, we can laser a beam straight between us tonight and three of the first girls we know of who wore nose rings in clannin."

Cozily entwined with Raohnailt against a hill of throw pillows, Gormglaith watched the nest spin down, lights dimming ever so slowly. Blodwen fell asleep near them, face hidden by sandy hair flowing to her waist. Maevis and Paestin snuggled crossways on their sides, bane blond-haired heads latched betwixt thewed thighs in a whistly closed loop as Lairlaith and Myghin drifted from the nest. Morfyd burrowed and folded up into a barrow of embroidered pillows. Njorthrbiartr sat knees to chin, lowering her head and staring wraithenly.

thrushes

When Gormglaith awoke, Raohnailt's twiggish arms were wrapped about her waist again. The banshee's eyes steadied upon a long, thick lock of straight sandy blond hair flowing across shy Blodwen's slender frame as she breathed in the slow even grasp of deep sleep, then stitched upon her left ear with its tabbish lobe and scooping whorls, bated fuzz glimmering inside.

Nearby Myghin, Maevis and Paestin, hair loose and askew, were jumbled in rumpled white longstockings which glowed in sundry hues beaming from the hall's soaring windows. Later Blodwen sprang off like a shrike, pixie bottom dwindling fast with sandy hair flying across it.

"Raohnailt."

"...Raohnailt."

"What."

"Might we be getting up now?"

"Hmm."

Gormglaith waited, shifting her limbs as Raohnailt followed and fit herself back in neatly with a sigh.

"Dost tha wanna sleep more?"

"No."

"Ok."

"I had the canny dream."

"Me too but I can't recall what it was," said Gormglaith.

"I can, kind of. I had fun, I think."

Raoghnailt rose to her knees and scanned the hall.

"Time to get up!" she said, taking a galloping crawl across the sweeping staddle's heaps, wrinkles and ruckles.

"Come on noddy bones! It's thy flurt!"

Gormglaith dragged herself off the cotton folds and they ran after Blodwen to slash side by side, scrub teeth and comb hair (making much more noise at it). Strolling to the supper lair they found scollagyn and shees having breakfast. Outside in the close, bright daisies were ruffled by a crisp wind as fat, yellow and black striped bumble bees made their bobbling rundles and trips under a harsh sunstorm. Plopping Frisian nestleblack, butter, jam and hazelnuts onto a shared dish along with a big bowl of seeds, grains and milk they headed for birch nest's empty longboard.

Raoghnailt coaxed Blodwen to spill about herself. She came from a clannin of Newhaven teach witches, brought in neach with a moof tide, warily so by the fettle there. She braided early towards being a shee and her kynn had taken her to see teaches across the world but on a Beltane eve the night she was maegden, Blodwen pledged the Meeching teach, only a few hundred yards from home. Thirteen moons later she carried over to Wrath ness. After two dozen or so moons with blueberry nest in the barrows she'd come to Haethwyck and birch to be with Raoghnailt. She found it all stirring but got homesick sometimes for her kynn back at Newhaven (Raoghnailt had gone thrice with her in the last year) and oh, by the way, she was close kin to Morigan, Morfyd and Gwenhwyfer, a Sparkenbane.

"So Blodwen had a thrill..." said Raoghnailt, munching hazelnuts, "her first time on the witch's lap, didn't thou Blodwen?"

Sandy hair swept forward and hid Blodwen's face.

"Tell."

They glimpsed a wild and mirthful grin behind swishing sandy hair as Raoghnailt spun brightly to Gormglaith.

"Blodwen slashed all over Rathyen's leg!"

Gormglaith broke out laughing, swiping hand to mouth.

"Sopped 'er! So the witch said," put Raognnailt, carrying on as Rathyen with eyes wide, "...Flattery!"

They were a flock of giggles as Blodwen's head bobbed.

"Tell her how many!"

Still lurking in a skein of flying hair, Blodwen flashed four fingers as Gormglaith's jaw dropped.

"She told her after," Raognnailt said with a shrug, spooning a milky glob from the shared bowl.

"So? What did she say...?" asked Gormglaith, shaking her head.

Raognnailt gazed at Gormglaith, spoon in hand.

"She said... 'How thrilling for thee, my bat. Thou'st scribbled the rune of a *swot* scollagyn.'"

They headed back through the lobby where a few gossiping scollagyn sat on a sill which skirted the light wafers. Beyond stood a clump of black clad shees gabbing in close hushes by the yew spackled doors leading to the dens. Gormglaith furrowed her brow.

In birch nest pillywigginish Blodwen took Gormglaith by the hands and with a mute stare pulled her to a bench along the wall, shoved her onto deep embroidery and dropped between scanish thighs to latch fast, tongue swirling. Bright eyed Raognnailt at her side, before purple heathered hills and cobalt blue sea Gormglaith gasped, dipped her head and with straw thatch swept forward, sailed by noon on her flurt.

Later they splayed out on their sides among hills of throw pillows.

"Blairie's stern," said Raognnailt, "but here, they go like, berserk for the splits."

"It's Wrath ness teach," put Gormglaith, "after all..."

"Aye," sighed Raognnailt, nodding with chin in hands. "So Tegan needled me when I got here. Get this... at Blairie root I lilled the ring spells, egg, one of the 'it' girls. I mean, they let me pledge here last year when I was still a maedchen. I *was* bleeding though... whatever. Then Tegan's like, 'This is all so sly Raognnailt, but we both know thou'st been breezing, don't we?' When she said that, I knew I was in the jelly graft."

"So thou wast breezing at Blairie?"

"Rather!" Raohnailt whispered with narrowed eyes and a witchy smirk. "It's what happens when thou haunst a known tide. Some things come way fast but there're all these notions about you beforehand which means when a frisky 3245bn7 like me laps the rings at fourteen, some sharpie buzzneck is bound to look up the skinny on a few thousand of mine over-swatting twins, skip the coos and ask, 'So, why didn't the little slacker split like that when she was twelve?' It's canny leeg. Thou'rt so lucky Gormglaith, thy braid's only been carried once before. No way is there enough dish to like, hint th'art not hewing rainbows as wanted so they can wave it in thy face and say, 'We know what thou canst do my bat and it's for thine own meed, after all...' Yech! A little tease spins the kin! Blodwen has it licked. With her wacky tide and all those weird snaps nobody has a clue about Blodwen and when she's in a swot den on the weeknight it's likely as not got anything to do with boards."

Blodwen, who'd been idly braiding a thin lock of her sandy hair, staring blankly through a window all the while, gave them a dimpled, sealed lip smile.

"Yeah..." said Raohnailt as she scruffed Blodwen's hair, "the slank elf! But thou knowst my bat I'll always be there for thee when they swoon, hissing in thine ear, 'slack-er... boppin' bloody bash!'"

"Yearning," said Blodwen, still braiding.

"Hag," Raohnailt baited back with wanton sneer.

"Raohnailt!"

"Chill, Gormglaith," Blodwen said softly, tying off her braid.

"See?" sighed Raohnailt. "I'm hashed and hemmed!"

The sharp clap of klompen on stone echoed off the walls.

"Fuck," said Raohnailt.

Maavis and Paestin breezed into the nest, bane blond hair pulled tight behind their heads in pony tails tied off with white string. They were followed by Myghin and Njorthrbiartr, who was behaving moodily.

"Hey," said Paestin.

"Hey," called Gormglaith and Raohnailt.

"We're gonna feed the blue goldfish," chirped Paestin.

"Ever seen one?" asked Maevis.

"No."

"Come with, then," they sang together.



Maevis and Paestin | breezed

"I liked thy tale about the nose rings," said Maevis as they flocked into the maze. "How's thine? Hast thou spun it?"

Raohnailt raised an eyebrow at Blodwen as they tagged behind. In the gleaming bath of black feldspar and pink quartz Maevis and Paestin led Gormglaith to a looking glass.

"Have a glom!" said Maevis.

Gormglaith glanced at herself and whirled about to the thrushes.

"Blue goldfish!" Paestin put cheerfully. "...Scrud."

"Raohnailt Blodwen Myghin and Njorthrbiartr fling flax," she said as they dropped and clattered to the hard black stone floor like rag moppes, sitting upon the bighty heels of blond alder wood klompen, thighs spread, palms set on them up and open.

Gormglaith gaped. Paestin eyed her sweetly and in a tongue slick and fallain as the smile on her fresh freckled face said,

"Dost thou have a clue?"

"I wa..."

"Shut up, 'k?" Paestin carried on airily.

Gormglaith flinched.

"Th'art a selfish clannin hag but... there's hope for thee. Now that thou'st tumbled into our nest, Maevis and I are going to help thee out with thy many snares, so do as we say or thy life here'll be an everlasting drudgery."

"Cool!" said Gormglaith, shrugging and nodding brightly.

Paestin cast up her eyes.

"Maevis I can't deal with this..."

"...She's heedless."

Paestin dropped to klompen heels near Blodwen, spread football thighs in dismay and flopped her hands on them with a sigh. Maevis, who was slightly leaner and somehow smoother than her twin, clopped up to face Gormglaith.

"Luzz flax," she whispered, forefinger warding down, "and don't *talk*."

Gormglaith quickly clambered, clattered and gathered as she could, putting hands palms up on taut thews and staring at Maevis' bighty raw wooden klompen as she stepped in close.

"Look up..."

Gormglaith lifted a stalwart chin, eyes dishing as she beheld spot on Maevis' bare chalken cleft hemmed by the teardrop flue of likewise chalken Glen pelyn linen longstockings.

"...further, at me."

So she did and Maevis hooked a finger through Gormglaith's nose ring whereupon she shrieked, raising stiffened, clawish hands.

"Thou toldst us thou always wanted a nose ring. Spog, i'nit?" Maevis said winsomely, crinkling her eyes with a tug, "...and do keep thy hands on thy thighs..."

"Scollagyn take care of their own. We fuck or shun and don't talk about stuff like in clannin and truly Gormglaith thou dostn't wanna be shunned, all the more on thy flurt, swot 'till tha die'st. If thou backslide'st, if thou even thinkst about it, before any of thy weepy plighted sisters gets the dimmest notion we'll each and every one of us shun thee with such steadfast heed, straight off thou'lt be squirming flat on the deck, begging for even the tiniest morsel of bloody snog which thou wilt'n't get. Grok?"

Gormglaith answered with a sob, tears running.

"'k, keep it back, I'm lettin' go," said Maevis as she slipped her finger out of the ring.

"Like my smell?" she asked, whisking her hillock and a whiff of natron, skin and far-off lilies by Gormglaith's nose.

"...Ta! We heard all about tea yesterday. Thou wast ladgeful and heedless. The witch had it stark for thy tummykins who had the knack to dump the lot of them and squeeze thee out for a later go but then, when she's plighted at last with the craven twin, what crawls onto her lap? Thee, the daft duck and no slinkin' swan, never mind Gillian. Was it *thrilling* for thee or what... clannin tease."

"Whatever," she said, hovering over Gormglaith. "Anyway chin up, close those big stalkers of thine and open thy beak for the vens hen then, 'k? There's an eager chick! Time for thy guzzle... 'n try not to spill?"

Maevis looked on high to the skylights and squished her eyes shut, upper lip quivering above overbiting front teeth a match for sparkling clunch when a fallain, wanly golden braided stream fell like salty tears in warm rooty broth and white vinegar. As Maevis' face echoed a skeinish tapestry, Gormglaith squealed agape, gasping, squinting, gulping, coughing then dripping whilst the thrush sprayed, squirting at the last, hands on hips.

"Merry flurt, scrud," said Maevis, giggling, nose ring aglitter over wispy overbite.

"Aw Gormglaith, please kiss me," she beseeched. "I know I don't have a sprout of red hair on my loopy head but I can tell, my bat, my bluegills, it's crush on the thrush, the true slim, not some maedchen *Tales of the knotty kindel* grope on the back forty."

With blinking eyes crossed, her face and chest soaked, so too the belly and thighs of her linens, leading with her tongue Gormglaith grazed, then pugged the scollagyn who quickly swung away.

"Gormglaith!" sighed the thrush, shuddering with hands over face. "What I want, what everyone wants, is scam 'n eggs. Thou knowst, like what Raognnailt's been getting not that you two could *even* handfast," she said, eyes narrowed, head wagging. "Everyone has such spog hopes for thee, which only means th'art in the jelly graft, cogged 'n bogged like anyone else."

"Uhm, truth be told," Maevis said with her clunchy smile, "way more. Now, a swot scolly in jelly graft's a nettlesome thing but th'art a *plighted* swot scolly and the whole bloody teach is canny stuck with thee. Thou talkst the talk but canst tha walk the walk? Thou luzzed thy puff our way at Loch henge and got the magpies in Fen Glioon all stirred up atwitter about how thou mightst spill 'n sway wicked fylgijc to millions. I say *trigger*. Some say *Celt shut*. I say *farmers' daughter*, dragged in clueless from the cabbage patch for wanton thrills 'n spills. So why not let's get things off to a handy start then? Sway thy knotted nesty here 'n spill how a bumpkin weaves a wicked spriggin o' wreath."

Gormglaith gazed once more at the chalken clef of Maevis Thrush Kin Dails Sparkenbane an inch from her nose, shrugged and glued her mouth to the narrow flue in Maevis' longstockings. Glancing at Raognnailt, the thrush gathered straw thatch in skeletal hands.

"Bloody flurt."

Later both were chasing their breath.

"Spill bright these spells we learn," Maevis gasped, "then bleed 'n bop stern, to grok in hex dreams... with bluebirds on a misty knock, by the pulling moon, bloody swots in cramp swoons which reminds me Njorthrbiartr let's show the banshee how hackled thou'st become."

Njorthrbiartr drew up awkwardly, then keeled forward as she padded across the feldspar tiles, laser straight white hair and sheer reedy limbs glowing against black stone walls, green eyes darting.

"See the tangles!" said Maevis, spinning Njorthrbiartr by the shoulders as strands flew in a fleet hint of slattag ghlass and cairmeal.

Meanwhile Myghin rose in one throw onto spindly long legs, sauntered across, briskly pulled Njorthrbiartr's wrap down about her thighs, took her steadfastly by the waist, bent the wispy scollagyn over onto tiptoes and put ten quick swats to her bottom. Njorthrbiartr bawled loudly by the fifth. Myghin yanked her longstockings back up, leaving them in rumples.

"So Gormglaith," said Maevis as she spun wailing, beaming Njorthrbiartr about again, "thou mightst wanna quack something spog like, 'Hey Njorthrbiartr! Gasping! Thou remindst me of a snowy egret! Like, perched in the old evergreen Yggdrasil tree or whatever! I mean, even if thou *art* a rather scritchey and nagsome srike hag wilt thou, uhm, let a selfish scrud chick like me wobble up from this weiry nest in her heedless tease ways 'n luzz thee a wee bit of scrub? I'd be ever so thrilled...'"



a snowy egret | in the old evergreen

Blodwen hissed under her breath and flat sandy locks as Raognnailt called out singsong,

"Oh thrushikins...?"

Maevis froze.

"What."

Raognnailt stood in a wink, periwinkle blue eyes alit.

"So Maevis, thou'rt truly stirring. I could listen to thee all after and I know since I *have* done but I think Gormglaith gets it by now so why not put that clever tongue of thine to fit freayll? Jam it up my knack 'n like, *wench out* so Gormglaith and Njorthrbiartr can carry on as they please and thou canst draw on a bit of sweet meed."

Gormglaith broke a witchy grin as Maevis stomped across to Raognailt, lasered a sneer, dropped to knees and welded her mouth to the scollagyn who swayed and glanced at the deeply hued skylights. Njorthrbiartr tapped Gormglaith on the shoulder.

"It's stark," Njorthrbiartr whimpered, hips thrusting and swaying. "I think th'art cunning and swank and I liked how thou toldst about Lizzy Sparks and the rings."

Gormglaith looked up into Njorthrbiartr's green eyes, grasped her bony hips and put butterfly to cleft, cheeks pulling. Njorthrbiartr's knees gave out and she scritch'd, grasping at straw.

Soon, Njorthrbiartr Solveig Sparkenbane staggered into the outskirts of Perth. To a yodelish sigh, the nimble thews in her arms, legs and flat belly threw and stiffened upon thin sturdy bones and she sobbed, setting off on salted sour berry throes astride whorling pog. The breathless scollagyn dropped to give Gormglaith bleary zombie kisses.

"Fooke!" Njorthrbiartr panted. "Bluedy nickenzie! Ta!"

They all flung flax close by.

"So there's this scollagyn oardagh," said Paestin. "No it's not in the *Eachdraidh*," she put, giggling with the others, "it's... *hush* and not meant to be written down. Scollies've been sayin' it ever since Tangwen Toreth folded up in the corner of that bloody inn at Hastings, bled herself to shreds and wove smack through the hackle in a stitch. If tha dostn't say it now thou'lt be shunned 'till tha dost, same if tha skive'st. So fling flax 'glaithikins, we're heathen..."

In waivery tongue Gormglaith spoke twelve strings with Paestin who was canny when she botched two of them.

"Ok everybody, together now,"

Raognnailt scooted in next to Gormglaith as they all leaned forward in a ring, grazing foreheads, holding hands on thighs and shouted in seven wild and glassy tongues,

*We're heathen
Swottin' for clannin
Fast to teach 'n Wyrð
Each in a stitch we've heard*

*We bleed and haunt bones
By pulling moon's bay
Then minding our own
We spill 'n sway*

*In flock flingin' flax
We're scollagyn true
We are the fylgja
Sealed by the flue*

Gormglaith grinned when they banded heads together cheek to cheek as one and cravenly pogged.

"'k," said Paestin, smirking and tugging Gormglaith to her feet, "let's pull ourselves together. It's thy flurt!"

"I held back after waking up," Maevis sang as she peeled off her longstockings and opened a steamy spray, "then drank three pints of bogberry for breakfast 'n clenched hard! I was gasping for a slash!"

the thing

Splashing in the sunken dunk pool they beseeched Gormglaith to float on her back and she was soon giddily numb from wet kisses in sixes. They came giggling and gabbing into the gather hall where Morfyd and Lairlaith were at the board, fingers reeling with hovering goblins.

As the others swapped linens, many of which were being topped with brightly hand crafted wraps, Gormglaith sat whistly naked, chalken and brooding on the sprawling staddle's very edge, bound *Eachdraidh* open beside her. She watched through the tall, puzzled windows as a gust of wind slammed into a clump of heather, then nodded once and pulled on the right leg of lately laundered longstockings.

"Dost thou have any bedecked wraps?" she asked Raoghnailt, who leveled a gaze back at her.

"Three. One's by Tarian of Tangy loch! Here, look..." she said, reaching into a hidden wall cupboard for a wide, crisply folded wrap with spright, sparkly swirls in pumpkin yellow saffron and purplish blue periwinkle.

"...I got this from the old knot at Blairie last Yule! I've already worn it for two flurts, Ostara and Midsummer's eve."

Gormglaith's eyes darted as Blodwen deftly slipped another glittery wrap back into the cupboard.

"How wouldst tha feel about putting a bit of freayll to Tarian's weal and stickin' to Glen pelyn pleats this after?"

Raohnailt gaped, then grinned.

"Merry flurt, Gormglaith!" said Morfyd, hugging her so tight the air squeezed out. "I have something for thee..."

Taking up a glowing, flurtsome cutty sark embroidered in deeply hued knots, she warded it with a wry smile, eyes alit.

"...It goes back more than two thousand years... bits at least!"

Gormglaith blinked, looking over at Maevis who with narrowed eyes and jaw set, tautly mouthed the unmistakable words, *wear it...*

She quickly spun back to Morfyd and nodded.

"Ta!"

"Thou see'st," said the henge twin, helping the banshee into long sleeves, "the threads are woven with something like four million gore gratings."

Along with its gold, platinum and greenish copper stitching, the cutty sark had a wan glow of shifted black light.

"Cracking!" said Morfyd.

Birch nest left in a noisy flock down the wide, tapestried greywacke hall leading to the lobby.

"Raohnailt," whispered Gormglaith. "I have to know. What'dst thou do when it happened to thee?"

"I don't know if I want to tell thee now," she said, looking forward with a smirk.

"Raohnailt?!"

Gormglaith raised her hands, glancing about to see if she'd gotten any looks.

"Tell...!"

"I laughed."

"Thou laughed."

"Only clannin bats weep," said Raognnailt, splaying her hands, "...wontedly."

"Hmph!" put Gormglaith from behind a lock of straw thatch.

"Ok. All the teaches *I've* ever heard of are snowed under in endless blizzards of gossip 'n any moppet growin' up in one is like, bound to overhear the odd snatch now and then. Meanwhile most bats are still gripless and fluttering when they get waylaid by their new nesties. Sorry I couldn't warn thee," Raognnailt said through a simper.

"That's cool... and I know y'all are uhm, a bit fast to the quick or whatever but weren't they a little hard on Njorthrbiartr?"

"Huh? Gormglaith they're kerfuffle for Njorthrbiartr!"

"Thrushes let Njorthrbiartr suck the froth from their coffee," said Blodwen.

Gormglaith frowned, then glanced back at Njorthrbiartr who was walking with a shyly chuffed grin and knit eyebrows, hand in hand betwixt beaming Maevis and Paestin.

"I mean," said Raognnailt, "scollies do boards in flattery and sway so here, girls who like each other trade bait. They told us all about it in root. With lots of maegden living together up close, coorsyn matched and all, it's a way to seal trust. Maybe not canny *Tales of the knotty kindel* but that's clanninthorpe and besides, Njorthrbiartr has a snare with dash and we're trying to help her with that."

"Didst *thou* get thy nose ring pulled?" asked Gormglaith.

"A little..." she answered, holding up thumb and forefinger.

"...Look," said Raognnailt, "thou canst be heedless as pye with me. I don't care. I think it's fetching."

"Rathyen and Gillian," said Gormglaith, shaking her head, "must both think I'm daft."

"I thought tha knewst," said Raognnailt, grinning like a moppet. "Apple blush is a big make out scam... farmers' daughter!"

"...So anyway, Blodwen's a clannin girl. What did she do when her nesties pulled the waylay?"

Raognnailt leaned forward as they walked, smirking at Blodwen.

"She said she groked the witch's words at last."

"What words?" asked Gormglaith as they neared the lobby's threshold and the echoes of much talk.

"Thou knowst... the broth! 'How thrilling for thee, my bat,'" Raognnailt put in Rathyen's birdish lilt. "'Thou'st scribbled the rune of a *swot* scollagyn!'"

Giggling, they strolled into the lobby where two dozen girls gabbed whilst others were already walking off through the daisies of the garden close towards the thorpe lane and nearby Grasp. Gormglaith's mirthy smile brought a burst of shrieks and clapping. Abashed, she held hand over mouth and gawked by a hanging lock of thatch.

Sharp eyed broom witches, hair bedecked here and there with the odd long thin braid and sprinkles of lily bits, mingled near the yew inlaid doors. One whispered in a sharp hiss to the others, "Now this time, don't forget Rhiamon's trick. If things get dodgy, say... *it's for the moppets...*!"

Birch nest's loose flock was cheerily greeted and hugged by two of these witches, a set of twins with crinkly heather eyes, wide faces, big teeth and shoulder length, strawish red hair (one had purple streaks, the other pink).

"Lairlaith 'n I are gonna have a wee chat with Margaid and Morisaid beforehand," sighed Morfyd, starting through the pumpkin yellow yew doors, "so... see you in the thorpe!"

"Hey Raognnailt, Blodwen..." Gormglaith called out breezily. "Y'all wanna come with 'n help me out then...?"

Morfyd cast Gormglaith a startled look as the lobby went hush. Lairlaith, her face a rune of sheeish grip, whispered in Morfyd's ear, pink brindled Morisaid doing likewise through the other whilst Raognnailt and Blodwen stood by as if she'd asked them drop by the dens for mugs of shinbane.

"Now Gormglaith," said Morfyd as the two witches pulled away, "there's no need to worry Raognnailt and Blodwen. Margaid and Morisaid'll help..."

"...No worries!" said Raognnailt as Blodwen cast her ever sketched hint of a smirk. "She asked me at Cluain house."

Morfyd gazed at the three of them, then shrugged.

"'k!"

Girls gasped, Gormglaith grinned, her nose ring gleamed. Straw blond thatch flew as she swung about to Bairrfhionn's lopsided, toothy grin and asked,

"Dost tha mind yet?"

Bairrfhionn closed her eyes and nodded.

"Hey Gormglaith!"

Gillian threw a scythe of a smile, hands on hip bones. Gormglaith yanked the banshee's wrist, tugging them both into a maegdenish kiss. Gillian answered by feeling her up with nippy heed.

"Hey sis!" Gormglaith blurted forth in a *knotty kindelish* tumble. "I mean, I swooned *out* when thou dropped in for a mugga yesterday and still can't get a grip, it's all so *too* like, chills 'n spills on blue barrow hills, tha knowst?" she carried on, throwing up her hands and smiling chalkenly. "Anyway a windy night's no time to stitch thy thatch!"

Gillian jerked Gormglaith close again by the waist to whisper snog-gishly in her ear.

"Thanks little sister. What a kick! Gasps! Even when tha botchst, th'art a duck!"

Gormglaith stumbled back as Gillian flashed her wicked maedchen kin grin then shyly stalked through the doors. Gormglaith, Raognnailt and Blodwen lagged behind in a close huddle.

"I've canny missed something but I don't know what," said Gormglaith, shoving back her thatch.

Blodwen flicked a pillywiggin shoulder.

"I've heard these bloody things can go thunk in a heartbeat," said Raognnailt.

"...So have I."

The thing den was walled in sundry white stone tiles with scattered bits of geayney green and the same looming corundum windows as most of Haethwyck, these looking on a swatch of the daisy drenched outer garden close framed by hills of windswept heather to the north, moors and misty meads to the west with blue sea beyond under billowing banks of clouds sulking in off the Minch. A two-yard board inlaid with ash, apple and yew wood, ringed by eight wide, matching chairs, their short backs made up of narrow slats, was lit by sundry beams from a keenly shining, low hanging wafered light.

Margaid shepherded Raohnailt and Blodwen to likened longboards and chairs along the walls where sundry witches were spindly settling in whispers. Meanwhile seating about the middle board was a tale of plights, Morigan Rathyen Morfyd Tegan Bairrfhionn Gillian and Gwenhwyfer then Gormglaith next to Morigan who looked so scollagyn in white longstockings, cutty sark and blond klompen, hair windblown from having been been outside. With the henge twins together side by side, Morfyd's sharpness and Morigan's somehow leaner frame showed starkly.

"It's our first thing with Gormglatih!" began Rathyen, singing airily. "Raohnailt and Blodwen have dropped by too! Now you two take all the time you want. *Ask* stuff if you like!"

She leaned back in a flat stitch to stay that way until they were gone.

"They're here for the thing," said Morfyd, not bothering to look up.

Rathyen answered with a puzzled smile.

"I'd say it's up to Gormglaith," put Bairrfhionn. "They're her friends."

"...Gormglaith how canst thou reckon this?" asked Rathyen. "Thou'st not even started teach, after all."

"Truth is," said Tegan, "this mid-day I got word from Woolf house. With her latest split, they're calling Gormglaith a tongue witch. There's more but I guess that's drift enough for now."

Gasps and whispers filled the thing den as Rathyen latched eyes with Tegan and Gormglaith stared open mouthed.

"The last I heard, plighted sister," said Rathyen, "thou wast a witch I don't know how many ways though we all know thou dost the splits like some pledges gather daisies on the mead or reel in the haunt and ever still," she put singsong, "thou tangle'st and sweepst with broom witches."

Tegan tossed back a steady gaze.

"I looked it up," said Gormglaith. "Aoibheann Faaie tangled things with scollagyn for three dozen moons."

"That was neach," put Rathyen, waving her hand.

"I'm neach."

"Art thou?"

"You knew what you were getting more or less. If y'all didn't want me as I am you shouldn't have plighted me."

A few witches sighed as Rathyen stonily scanned the den.

"I must say," she said wistfully, "thy bent for worrying does bring to mind both Devon Rand and Geileis Grendel."

This stirred smatters of laughter which Gormglaith answered with a nettled look.

"So anyone wanna speak up on this or what," asked Rathyen with a needling glance back at her.

Nobody did. Gormglaith swung about to Morigan, who eyed her from behind a lank lock of hair. Gwenhwyfer giggled, trying to put down a grin.

Gillian stared off afar. Bairrfhionn had eyes down, smirking, long red hair cascading upon reedy, black sleeved arms. Morfyd gauntly shrugged and slouched whilst Tegan read a yellow goblin.

"Ok," Rathyen sighed with another wave of a wan hand.

As they began talking anew, about a sunflower patch on the southern reaches of Wrath ness or something, Morigan leaned close to Gormglaith and whispered, "Lilies, 'lil sis. Thou mightst think about shirking off a bit for now."

Ta! Gormglaith mouthed back.

She glanced over her shoulder as Raoghnailt jammed her a whist thumbs up.

"So what's the wyrd on wheats?" Rathyen asked a bit later.

"Flat," sighed Bairrfhionn. "I mean, for any left who still lend us a shred of heed. Rhiamon in Snotra says we're not tuggin' at this nearly enough, most of the thralls I know say we must be daft to keep raggin' on them about it at all, I'm weary."

"Sounds like a keen bash-up..." put Rathyen.

"...Morfyd?" she sang.

"Sorry..." said Morfyd, looking up from a skeinish goblin. "No. Glynt called at noon. She said, 'Hi Morfyd, reckon we've sent y'all the canny fit freayll then, 'k? Bye.'"

"*Glynt* said all *that?!*" asked Bairrfhionn, bemused.

"Rather," put Morfyd. "Anyway it's but a wee quickening i'nit."

"I'd say *sliver's* the word," said Rathyen, raising an eyebrow.

"Yep," said Morfyd.

Bairrfhionn put out a hand palm up and opened her mouth to speak but froze with a sharp start as she beheld the glowing pumpkin goblin hovering before her eyes.

"I'm not thrilled about this, Morfyd..."

Bairrfhionn's upwarded palm jiggled once to a beat.

...

"...Ok. Fuck it. Slashin' shinbane, I'll brew with the hag."

"I'll clutch," said Tegan as she glanced out at a stand of pumpkin lilies swayed over by a gale off the Keayn sheear.

Gillian only twirled her eyes.

"As *if*," said Gwenhwyfer, "this was *even* up my gwli."

Morigan wistfully nodded her head towards Gormglaith, right hand on the deeply inlaid board, a long and knobby forefinger flicking at the middle.

"...Erm, Glynt? Way!" said Gormglaith.

The twin winked and slouched like a yodeler. Gormglaith knitted her brow.

So the thing ended with a thunk. Gwenhwyfer, eyes crinkled and balled hands wagging, smunched Gormglaith on the cheek.

"A spinning plop into the pond!" said Rathyen, smooching her on the other. "I'd be thrilled, Gormglaith, if thou, Raognnailt and Blodwen would walk me to the thorpe."

"Ok..."

"Lilies!" the witch answered, eyes flashing.

She fluttered off and Gormglaith was swarmed by bright eyed broom witches who threw little white showers of lily bits at her. A few were smirksomely snotty, Margaid and Morisaid wantonly flicked their tongue dabs. Meanwhile she watched after Morfyd, drifting out alone.

Back in birch nest Blodwen leapt onto the tidy staddle and curled up in a ball near a glimmering window. Gormglaith and Raognnailt folded up with her and after muffled giggles tried to nap. Later Gormglaith was nudged from a light sleep, Blodwen grinning over her. They woke Raognnailt, ran noisily to the lobby and found Rathyen gabbing with Flocklaith whose white, pumpkin freaked hair was pulled, braided and ribboned as ever but a puffy, reddened stare belied she'd been weeping again.

"I hope we're not late...!" Gormglaith said breathlessly as they flocked about the witch.

"Late? Are they late?" asked Rathyen, whirling to Flocklaith with wide eyes.

"We were early," she answered with a snuffle.

"Oh yes, we had a chat about Harvest home but now there's a walk to walk! Come on then girls, let's not faffle!"

In her wonted black linens, open cutty sark and bighty wooden walking klompen, by short edgy steps Rathyen glid over the threshold and through the fog. With long blue black hair lasering straight to narrow hips and skin like moondust in the shimmering gloom her scaanish cast runed an early scan from the *Eachdraidh*.

"See thee!" said Rathyen, fluttering a hand at Flocklaith.

"Now I've put some thought into this," she began. "Here Blodwen, walk between Gormglaith and me? Thou dostn't talk much my bat and we don't want to lose track of thee! Raognnailt... on my left? There! How thrilling! The westerlies off the Keayn sheear are so chilling!"

"So Blodwen," she said as they walked towards the thorpe between thick, low chalky walls overbrimming with green peat, "I so *gabb*ed with weather pinks and glommed earth casts the evening Gormglaith got hinged, sowing a gloomy, overcast and fog drenched after for her flurt and a Monandaeg's so fitting, dostn't thou think?"

Blodwen's windblown sandy hair hid her face as she glanced up at the witch. They took the air, grey clouds and breezy haze.

"A moon's too long," sighed Rathyen. "I might get out more often, say every half moon?"

Gormglaith grinned.

"Anyway when the three of you walked into the thing only Tegan needed any sway. She can be such a cold and willful hag... fetching girl."

Rathyen looked straight into the whist fog with a smirk.

"Thou rattled Gillian with thy cleverness. She was set to swoon when you two kissed but shirked at being drawn into a game at which she has no match, at least not in this clannin. Thy play with her was nonetheless bewitching for showing a wrinkle in any wyrd. It's not always needful, or even wholesome, to win."

Rathyen winched an eyebrow.

"Meanwhile we have a walk, and gossip seeps like the mist."

"Oh Rathyen...!" said Raognailt. "I hope thou'rt walking with us for fun, too!"

"Am I?! Ta!"

"It's funny how teach clannin still wontedly plight henge maedchen," said Rathyen, "when lately we seem to've gotten wrapped up in so much freayll. Thou saidst it thyself. We knew what we were getting, forget the splits... still a bit grainy but elbows do shine, rubbing as they will on the bone boards of Wrath ness and such a duck."

"I got what I wanted," Gormglaith put cannily, "and rough elbows or not I'm willing to tangle with broom witches."

"Those lily luzzing snots?! I happen to know a few who lap each other off to sleep at night in craft rings among broods of hoppers and goblins and munging pinks and they remind us of the dust they sweep with the wilted lily bits they leave in their merry wakes, I can tell thee. Meanwhile most of the little raggers haven't read more than a shred of *Eachdraidh*. Oh, they're weird enough I guess... so long as it's to do with toasters or driving off norns but thou knewst that, or guessed at something like it."

"I mean, yeah, I know there's a stitch..."

"What kind of stitch didst thou have in mind, Gormglaith?"

"I'm glarking, ok? For starters all this odd freayll 'n hex like with Maiden lane's wonky wabbits never mind those dodgy grain plaits which I don't grok but I do know what the *Eachdraidh* has to say about stuff like that."

"What does the *Eachdraidh* say?"

"It's to do with tongues then i'nit."

"Gasping, Gormglaith."

A grey billed, black winged twite with a bright pink rump flittered onto the low chalkstone wall nearby and sang to them as Gormglaith loudly drew her breath.

"Hello!" she called. "Art thou getting ready for winter? I think thou art! How fat thou lookst!"

Raoghnailt and Blodwen grinned when Rathyen stared at the banshee's maedchen bottom sheathed in white longstockings as she leaned in to reach out with upended hands and the bird hopped onto them. Rising, Gormglaith held the thickly feathered, quivering little bundle before her face and beamed brightly by wind ruffled thatch.

"Girls handle them," said Rathyen, "and feed them flaxseeds, which some say they shouldn't do..."

Gormglaith flashed a smirk at Rathyen and smoothly put the twite back on the wall, from which it twittered at her then lit off towards the heather.

"What nettles me," said Gormglaith as they carried on with their walk, "is this kind of thing takes time to crop up. So something's been stopping you from doing anything about it. The snare wouldn't be for lack of tongue witches though. Devon once said there were maybe only six dozen girls in the world sly as me or whatever at old English. 'k then, flip it. You had them all to haunt whilst I was still trying to grok *Gayolyn's gabs*."

"I'd like to have seen that... thee gabbing away on Geileis' hip!"

Here another lane swooped in from the right where three black sleds had stopped in a trundling fog, lights blinking within pumpkin hued halos. A dozen girls with as many daughters, each alike clad in aspen grey linens, black cutty sarks and raw, wan ash wood klompen stood in a close, tall and reedy clump, watching whist with baleful sunken eyes.

"Some edgy pink," sighed Rathyen, "has told their sleds to wait. Say hello, Gormglaith!" she put, fluttering a wave. "They're clanniners from Tongue. Fellstone barrows, east across the ness!"

"Hi!" said Gormglaith as they walked by.

"Hi!" a few called back.

"Rathyen says you come from Tongue!"

"Aye!" answered one with ash hair. "Art thou Gormglaith?"

"I guess I am!"

The Fellstones faced each other in hushed gabs.

"Merry flurt, Gormglaith!" the girl yelled.

"Thanks for coming! Hey! I'm sorry about the sleds!?"

"They told us!"

"So Rathyen," she said, waving as they left the crossway, "what does Too slim have to say about all this... codswallop?"

"Ah, Too slim! Thy shy kin Graih Grendel, a tongue witch like thee! We had crushes years ago. Wretchedly, some of our notions about *things* clashed and we had to break it off. I don't think she ever got over it. Neither did her shenn Grainne who stitched a reeling Samhain flurt for us at the Kin Dails Ben chee inn, seeing to it Giorsal and Geileis Grendel would be there. So was Seosaimhthin Fen but I was telling thee about clever Graih! Sometime later she split the broom and swept her way north to Follym downs, a sleepily wanton little seaside thorpe back then, plighted some Grimms and inside thirteen moons, with her nimble hands on the loom that noddy little freayll veered stern and fat. Meanwhile Graih's a needle with two jabbers... and rather the brat! Tens of thousands've snuggled up to her hush fad, along with her notions of how, after most echoes of Maiden lane have crashed, she might trigger a new gweeping sewn by Graih Grimm the Too slim. What's that lass yodel by the Gumm Bats? *Too slim, kissin' kin?* So birr!"

They skirted a shallow bend in the peat to low rumbles of thunder.

flurt

The westerly lane running through Grasp was clogged with clan-niners, shees and scollagyn mingling in clumps and clutches as moppets clung to hands and thighs or zoomed through the flocks. Maedchen leaned coolly hip to hip against low walls by gwlis, their flapperish haircuts streaked with bright pinks, pumpkins and purples or banded blue black and searing white. Nigh a shop with its cast of a fat green apple glowing in the fog a few naked scollagyn did leaping somersaults, cartwheels and tumbles to cheers and loud clapping on a beat.

Raoghnailt, Rathyen, Blodwen and Gormglaith stopped to watch a dozen girls with braided, daisy-drizzled locks as they clopped a Ygg-drasil clog reel in blond wooden klompen, weaving wide black light shifting ribbons into amazingly twined plaits about the green and white

striped trunk of the thorpe's lone, looming rowan ash tree, its leaves already ablaze in their pinkish red of the northern fall, with nary a tangle.

Ribbon ends fluttered brightly upon gnarled roots to squeals and a few shrieks melded with scattered clapping as they strolled by a skewed and glassy cluster of flats nestled under the peat. At the thorpe's misty middle, in a thicket of blue flax blossoms by a white granite block cut with fylgic runes a freckled shee, her red hair bedecked in snowy daisies, played liltish airs on a moppet-high, three dozen stringed blond wood clarsach set betwixt black longstockinged thighs.

"Greddan's playing a call," said Rathyen as they neared her, now flocked by flurty girls. "Wave and they'll put thee on the thorpestone to say what thou like'st."

Gormglaith nodded, tossed the flurtsome cutty sark to Raognhailt and raised an arm. Cheers and screams surged as she was lifted, grinning and eeking, by two dozen hands about her elbows, underarms, bottom, thighs and calves. To the sound of soaring clarsach strings Gormglaith glid onto the smooth top of the thorpestone from which she looked upon more than four hundred gathered faces, framed in sundry cuts of hair from whites to blonds to reds, flaxes to blue blacks. The sea breeze caught Gormglaith from behind, sweeping chin length straw thatch across her face.

Among this throng Bairrfhionn and snow white haired Ffion stood in a wanton yoke with two others from beech nest. Gillian hid within a knot of clannin girls and scollagyn, all wearing flued aspen greys and raw wooden klompen like her, as nearby a flock of wide eyed moppets whistly watched and a few brooding maedchen tried to make like they didn't know she was there. Tegan lurked in a shadowy gwli with two tall maegden in bane whilst Gwenhwyfer battishly haunted the flocks. Creiddyladl and Feegan stood with their backs to the thorpestone, talking to the ash-tufted Killeens from Skipthorpe, so lass. Kishan gabbed away whilst Keain and Ketch mostly kicked cobblestone with star-bedecked klompen in what looked like sheer boredom. By a mossy green greywacke wall Rathyen bent twiggishly in fast pog with Blodwen who stood sapling straight, head thrown back, legs yawed together, sandy hair swaying across pixie bottom as Raognhailt gabbed nearby with Morfyd and Morigan who leaned on one another in black cutty sarks and longstockings deeply creased at the knees, their pumpkin hued klompen jumbled together in a row.

Casting a witchy grin from ear to ear Gormglaith threw arms overhead, eyes glittering from behind wind-raked thatch, chalken skin and linens floating against the tidal mist, lean strong legs in raw alder wood klompen set flat upon hard granite. Thunder trundled across the thorpe to shrieks, shouts and reeling yodels. Holding this throe until a hush fell over her flurt, she shyly said with tilted head,

"...Hey."

A crackling low boom of thunder pealed.

"I'm so flattered and I'm glad, hangin' out with y'all in such a wraithen gloom!"

These words brought clanninish calls and Gormglaith opened her arms, fog rushing behind her.

"Lookin' at your haunted faces, in this tidy and barrowish thorpe, by the cliffs of a tolling and wonderous sea, I know it, I'm home."

Cheers, screams and scritchies echoed against the peat-dripping, low bluestone and greywacke walls of Grasp.

Gormglaith stared upon the sly and seagh, the glinn and grinn, drew her breath and spoke, building to a shout over cackles of thunder.

*Gathered here to greet
Sisters and kin
We meet in pleats
Wherever plights wend*

*Hearts brewed with apples and pine
Clannining, I come to mine
To bid you all a fettle thirst
Now sup and reel upon my flurt!*

Arms at her sides, Gormglaith bent forward and deeply lapped the salt air once with her tongue, ending Rhonid Sparkenbane's *Flurt call* with a scythish grin, thunder claps bouncing in sharp cracks, straw thatch flying on the gale as shrieks, wails and squeals flooded the thorpe lane. She waved her right arm in a flurry then stepped towards the edge of the thorpestone and a squall of hands above eerily eager faces. Shrugging gangly shoulders with a smirk and an eek she walked off into their stirring clasps and drifted, then clattered on klompen to the cobblestones.

Gormglaith was now chatted up by dozens of scollagyn and shees. Many said they'd known Flann at Blairie, others recalled Geileis, Giorsal and Enid from Rand house. Indeed, Gormglaith had already met some of these girls, mostly with Grainne at the low and sprawling hilltop home overlooking meads and faaies on the banks of the Running river in Kin Dails where her shenn clannined. Raoghnailt and Blodwen clopped up and in wry giggles, bidding Gormglaith merry flurt and fettle nest, pulled her off.

Gormglaith whispered singsong by red dauwed hair, "Uhm, Raoghnailt... I mean, this is bodeful as fuck... so why am I feelin' so fleet?"

"Aye," sighed Raoghnailt. "Last time I felt this skittish was goin' to meet Blodwen's folks in Newhaven last year."

"How'd it go?"

"'twas *thrilling*," said Blodwen, slicing in.

In swirling mist the two clannin girls took Raoghnailt hand in hand between them and walked towards a brightly lit dumpling kitchen called *yn Teaystag* where the golden yellow ghost of a wheat sheaf cast its glow on flutters at boards strewn with loose wildflowers. Inside, strips of blue and yellow light streaked across copper and blond wood as girls gabbed, latched, mingled and pulled.

After they gathered dishes at a shelf littered with flurty fare watched over by copper kitchen robots, Blodwen cast but a dimpled smirk as she tugged Gormglaith to a seat between Morigan and Rathyen. Cheeks were kissed and Gormglaith happened a glance at Morigan's nipples which were scammeled and wet with reddened brims. The henge twin grinned from a corner of her mouth, slouched waggishly and held out lanky arms to Gormglaith who shyly dipped her head to be cradled in them. All hushed as she drew, hands held lightly below at either side of the Glen pelyn wrap across Morigan's ribs, straw thatch quivering. Then came aws and ahs when they shared a limby and clanninish hug. As gabs and gollop anewed the twin nodded towards a stemmed silver gobel shaped like a half open lily, worn, rather beat and upended in front of them.

"In a while I guess Rathyen'll flip it and we'll hear a frightful yodelin' feish!"

Gormglaith glommed a stare onto it.

"Hey Morigan, that looks like the Newhaven lily."

Morigan gazed too as she knitted eyebrows and scratched the back of her head through ranting honey blond locks.

"Yeah, dudnit."

Gillian rushed by in a breathless gaggle before flocks of girls who came and went with heaped dishes, flurting to the cloppish clatter of klompen. Meanwhile Raognnailt and Blodwen were hemmed by a skein of scollagyn as gossip of their swoop into things wove through the droves.

Rathyen flipped the silver lily and everyone stood up in clumps as four clanniners walked through the doors to loud gasps, shrieks and clapping, their rainbow brindled hair whisking taut, thewisch bottoms sheathed within harshly washed out, much rumpled dark grey longstockings beneath black linen cutty sarks, trim, unbedecked and collarless.

"Docking flurts, Gormglaith," said Raognnailt, "it's the Gumm Bats!"

Clopping in big and clunky, heavily scuffed black klompen they threw themselves together in a loose row, facing Gormglaith with sullen stares and darkly blued lips. Then one of them walked straight for her, stopping so close the bighty fronts of their klompen clacked loudly together. Each girl's eyes widened, kindled and locked when the Gumm sister reached into the banshee's cutty sark, both hands settling on clarsach ribs. Raising a canny red eyebrow, she shrugged, leaned in and latched. Gormglaith screeched as the flurt gathering answered with screaming applause. Clawing her hands into pink, blue, red, green, yellow and pumpkin locks, she tugged the yodeler's head steadfastly tighter to her chest and looked on high, blinking wide watery blue lake eyes and biting her lower lip all the while. When at last the two let go of each other Gormglaith staggered backwards into Raognnailt and Morigan's arms under another wave of gasps.

"Merry flurt, huh?" the yodeler put with a wink as she spun about to saunter cloppingly back to her sisters, bumping one on the shoulder as she took her spot in the row with thoroughly ruffled, thick rainbow hair and a smirk.

"Oh Gormglaith," sobbed Raognnailt as cheers and clapping mingled again, "wouldst thou forsake me after all? They've taken thee for a lass!"

"Or would in a heartbeat," Morigan said with a wry smile, smacking hands together herself.

"Likely so but *that* was for Too slim, my little henge maedchen," put Rathyen, stirring sundry looks from all along with a puzzled one from Gormglaith, still catching her breath.

The Gumm Bats began their feish with a rather bewitching take on the West meads yodel *Elm leaves*. Next was an edgily spellbinding weave of Kied Keel's *Third braid*, wontedly heard at plight flurts but not like the Gumms spun it that afternoon. Morigan and Raognnailt gripped Gormglaith's bony hands. Rathyen wiped an eye and shook her head as the four yodelers grinned (though some might say *sneered*) to weepy hand claps. Screams and pog blown by thrusting tongues followed the Gumm Bats as they made fast for the way out. The witch kissed sparkly tears streaming down Gormglaith's face and whispered,

"See Gillian."

Gormglaith, sniffing and wiping cheeks with her palms, smiled. The lekker kin had hand to mouth and her eyes were truly wet.

"Yep," said Blodwen, starry eyed and lapping Raognnailt's damp cheeks, "that blew away the cobwebs."

Meanwhile the ash haired clanniner from Tongue, with wooden klompen clapping, came over to Gormglaith and held out a skeletal hand.

"Hi Gormglaith, I'm Fwenhwyfer Fellstone!" she said, words spilling forth. "My sisters are too shy to meet thee but they want to say we're all so thrilled... and know we can reckon on thee!" she put with a nod, wafting to Morfyd and leaving Gormglaith with a puffy eyed, wordless grin stuck on her face as five gawky shees walked up stiffly to gape moodily at her. Wearing black, flued longstockings and cutty sarks, each had a neat little tab of white cloth dangling between her thighs.

"Hey...!" said Gormglaith, still brushing away tears.

"Hey!" they answered in choppy togetherness.

"So... uhm, where're y'all from?"

"The Goile," said a shee with limp chin length blond hair. "Don't mind us, we're only a flock of hex hags," she sighed, putting forth a warm, moist hand. "I'm Gwerfyl."

"Oh. So... whatd'st thou think of Maiden lane's wabbits?"

The shees swapped smirks. Gwerfyl crinkled her nose.

"Gritch."

They giggled.

"Gwerf's the whist one," said a lanky shee with big ears poking from short ginger hair.

"Look," said a pithy, flaxen shee with two thick braids tied off in floppy black bows, "they're geef. Maiden lane grepped for awhile... then scrozzled. 'k?"

"Dost thou gweep?!" asked Gwerfyl.

A narrow door cracked slowly open as Raoghnailt stuck her head out to peer left and right. Under the echo of flurt noises she, Gormglaith and Blodwen crept, then dashed through an empty gwli and darted through high grass to a slate path behind yn Teaystag's gleaming, glassy kitchen. After walking by the low bluestone barrows of Wrath ness teach they broke from the fog on a windblown heather downs. The Minch loomed blue ahead.

This walkway met up with the thorpe lane and the three rambling maegden soon came to seaside Sandwood, a gale blown cluster of crofts, their many-hued flagstone walls half sunken in the peat and set with gormish, thick blue green paned windows. By a sled sized boulder of greywacke scrawled up with moppet runes and drawings in bright chalk, three screeching moppets played with a jump rope glowing pink in shifted black light from the sky. A taller one with cropped red hair, arms held straight down at her sides and skipping nimbly, sang the words for *Magpie reeling* as her two friends twirled the braided rope in a fast blur, over and under.

*One for sorrow
Two for mirth
Three for plighting
Four for a birth
Five for freayll
Six forlorn
Seven for a witch
I can tell thee no more*

"There are lots of yarns about magpies," put Blodwen as they strolled by, "but none are too helpful, since they're not the ones magpies know."

As song and squeals looped and faded into roaring surf they walked some ways along a trampled grass path and were plying through a breezy cliffside stand of wild flax bearing blue blossoms when Blodwen, with sandy hair flapping in the salted gale, sang,

"Y'ever play, Gormglaith?"

"Play what?"

"Laik about is all, like, for the fun of it... thrills, without worry or heed."

Gormglaith threw a glance.

"I mean it's not *even* as if thou'st taken thine eyes off me since before we got up," said the faaish scollagyn, wooden klompen smunching upon dry grass. "Forever Findabair. Wretched Findabair. I think th'art wanton."

"No way!"

"Blodwen!"

"Stay out of this a tick, ok Rag? ...Yes way!" she shouted, tamping to a halt. "What dost thou want?"

"Blodwen?!"

"There! Thou didst it again! It drives me east when thou dost that! Why dostn't thou *say* something instead of standing there gawping like some maedchen thrall from the sticks?"

"Because I *am* a maed..."

"Codswallop! For a tongue witch thine is *so* too tied!"

Raoghnailt burst into laughter, quickly slapping a hand to her mouth.

"...Whatever," said Blodwen, hands on pillywiggin hips, eyes flaring. "Mistletoe don't bloom on elms 'n daisies don't flower on flax. What's it all about, then?"

"To have a walk without gettin' ragged on, for starters..."

"Beetle bones! What dost thou want?"

"How 'bout lettin' me *be* on my flurt, ok Blodwen?" beseeched Gormglaithe, splaying her hands with a hopeful nod.

"We *ditched* thy flurt, remember?"

"Why dostn't thou go jump off a cliff then, if it nettles thee so?"

"Maybe I will! Is that what thou wantst?"

"Don't be a goop."

"Oh, gob me," sneered Blodwen, looking out across the ocean.

Thunder crackled and rumbled from afar. Gormglaithe scythed a wicked grin, then her knees gave out and Blodwen wove hands into straw thatch as she cast Raoghnailt a thin lipped and dimpled smirk, sandy hair flying whilst flax blossoms swayed in stiff waves about them, misty moors before fog drenched, purple heathered hills with a brooding blue Minch stirring fast below.

Soon enough, singing shouty rundles of *Magpie reeling* they skipped onward to the path's end and through a narrow cut in the cliff made by a brook, clattered down a flight of steps, each marked by two true blue, rumpled glass swatches set flush and brightly underlit in the slate, to land on a sweeping beach of pinkish white sand where waves pounded big boulders tossed here and there at the water's edge.

"Neach beach," said Raoghnailt, "...thrilling for luzz ball, moonrises too."

"Tide's aflowin'," said Blodwen.

Some thirty yards before high cliffs of dark purple sandstone they came to a rise of rubble whereupon sat a sleek white slushstone croft with a pitched blue tile roof. Its weathered and heavy sky blue door bore bane runes:

Shenn Rhonwen's beach house

hot meals

coffee

brownies

come in

Inside it was like any cozy beach croft, with snug bolstered settles and half a dozen boards, each bearing a small, neach lamp spewing all kinds of hues. The floor was flat wood planking laid loose over smooth slushstone and the whitewashed walls carried many banners and casts, shelves thick with sundry, weird old things, cloth bound books and sea shells. Leaned in a tidy row were two dozen bright air-weight surfboards.

They were greeted by a towheaded and freckled girl in blue grey longstockings and dark blue Frisian klompen set with feldstone half moons. She had big wrinkly brims and a startled look on her face.

"Hey Braith!" Raohnailt sang breezily.

"Hey Raohnailt! Blodwen... what's the wyrd? Gormglaith!" put Braith, holding out a hand and sweeping back elbow length tow hair with the other. "I saw thee on the thorpestone! Merry flurt!" she said, her gaze falling pithily to the banshee's knees, wherewith all glances followed.

Gormglaith bent down and brushed stiff flecks of dry grass from the rimpled linen weave as Blodwen cast doe eyes rafter-ward, fingers clasped carelessly before her flue. Braith smiled chalkenly, to the scribble of Raohnailt's smirk.

"So... would y'all like some coffee or what?"

"Brownies!" they shouted together.

By hazy light they sat in a bay window looking onto the beach and blue Keayn sheear blending seamlessly with misty, moody sky.

"Spells!" Raohnailt said moppishly, chin in hands. " $x^n + y^n = z^n$!"

" $a^n + b^n = c^n$..." Gormglaith answered dodgily.

" $y^n = x(x - a^n)(x + b^n)$," sighed Raohnailt, showing sets with deft forefingers to groans and giggles.

Blodwen nodded towards a wanly blinking, somehow gripping pinkish light high in the murky haze a league north.

"It's the lighthouse on Wrath ness," she said, munching a brownie.

"Cailin Skip..." Gormglaith put amid gollops, "and the north-western evermost of Scotland. A thousand years ago Cailin took a stroll up there with some friends, wandered off alone into the haze and was never seen again. She likely walked straight off the cliff but they say a gale blowing across those grasses in a thick fog can sound like the wails of someone beseeching to be found. Have you ever heard it?"

"A few times..." said Raognhailt, gazing out the bay window into the gloom, "but it's ok if you stay by the bye."

"I want to walk that lane in the fog," Gormglaith sighed dreamily, chin in hands.

"Thou wilt," said Blodwen, sweeping brownie crumbs into a small mound with her hands.

Bairrfhionn rushed in, red locks all but wild wohrls.

"I found you!" she said, chasing breaths, hair wafting down to her sides.

"How thrilling," mumbled Gormglaith, yawing her head back towards the window.

"What are you doing here?!" she asked.

"Eatin' spog 'n swappin' spells, I'd glark," Raognhailt said with a shrug.

"You left without telling anybody."

Gormglaith cast a lasered stare.

"So?"

"Skip it," sighed Bairrfhionn. "Come on," she said, nodding towards the door with a loopy grin. "Let's go make some *Eachdraidh*."

"That's *it*? That's all thou came'st here for?"

Bairrfhionn gaped as Raognhailt leaned back, flipping her hair.

"Rather," said Blodwen, licking crumbs from nimble fingers. "Wrath ness henge is so chilling on a Tiweseve."

"Braith..." sighed Gormglaith as she and Bairrfhionn plodded back across the pink sand.

"Sandwood girl," said Bairrfhionn, "clanniner... surfer!"

Gormglaith gazed across the misted pink beach thrown between soaring purple cliffs and steadily tolling breakers.

"So Bairrfhionn here we are, plighted for two nights and thou'rt already stalking me. Is it meant to be *thrilling* or what."

Bairrfhionn grabbed Gormglaith by the waist, tugged her close and seized a clump of straw blond thatch, draping her head back.

"Gasping," said Gormglaith.

Bairrfhionn's hair flew crimson in the wailing wind.

"The very sight of thee," Gormglaith put with burning eyes, "makes me think of her and my wantoness. I could have grasped and carried a daughter with Findabair and the Farlings but plighted this barren teach with thee and I may never get over it."

A storm of maple red hair streamed across shining popinjay eyes and a wraithen smile when a huge wave slammed into the boulders, shattering in froth and spray as the banshees hurtled into a yawning kiss. Gormglaith threw her arms about Bairrfhionn's neck, nuzzled into her hair, breathed deep and wept.

A silvery sled skirted left onto the coastal lane, then glid through a mead of rippling grass and breck browsed by black and white spotted oxen who watched it whisk by in a light fog. The Minch spread blue and blurred beyond the purple cliffs, plait to Gormglaith's wordless whist as Bairrfhionn sat with willowish limbs akimbo, staring out the sled's sloping window. The pink light of Wrath ness, much closer now, flashed true and spellbinding through the white spray. In a hough by the crook of a burbling, stony brook they glimpsed a flax haired clanniner in thrallish grey longstockings and thrash wooden klompen, scaanishly entwined with a tall s-shaped beryllium scythe, its keen blade a gleaming grin as high fall grass tumbled sleepily before the steady swing of her slackening gait.

"So did Seosaimhthin eat a daisy, too?"

"There's talk..." said Bairrfhionn. "They say she went to the moon henge at Rand mead in Kin Dails, put a finger down her throat and threw it up."

Gormglaith stared at Bairrfhionn, then flopped her head back against the seat with a sigh, straw thatch dropping upon her face.

"...I can grip..."

"...Where is she now?"

"That's the puzzle! Some say she ran off to Oregon and pledged a teach. All we truly know is she never did get hanged and doesn't want to be found. Anyway since th'art asking, lately I've heard a whisper she's been seen in Follym downs but, as it happens, nearly every clannin anywhere has some shenn by the wombs who shared her and Raoghnailt's 3245bn7 braid and what's more, lots of bairn are still brought in with it, nigh unto all any fit fettle will allow, even for the most known and steadfast of tides. So Raoghnailt and Seosaimhthin have hundreds of twins and we don't know yet if it's her, as if anyone could believe otherwise."

They sped across the moor, climbing by a narrow lane between close stone walls holding back waves of deep green peat and after a furlong found two more silvery sleds snug by a small white croft and a narrow gate, then went on foot along a foggy slate path hemmed by girl-tall bladed grasses. The clops of their klompen mingled with the muffled echoes of ocean waves trundling against stone when a rush of wind gathered chill upon breck and faiyr like the keen of a weeping maegden.

Gormglaith cast a rattled glance at the freayll witch walking beside her in long legged strides.

Bairrfhionn flashed her lopsided smile.

"Cailin says 'Hi!'"

They soon came to a thigh high wall of inlaid greywacke and white Clash carnoch granite carved with fylgic runes. Wrath ness henge slung low in the mist.

Waiting for them at the dark narrow slab of a doorway were Gwenhwyfer and Gillian standing wan like wraiths, coolly holding hands, hair fluttering across still cheeks, staring out from deeply sunken and bright eyes.

Gillian opened her arms and they took hands.

"Hey y'all," she said. "Is this a kick or what?"

"The four banshees of Wrath ness..." said Gormglaith.

"...in clannin at last!" put Gwenhwyfer.

They pulled together as four in edgy pog.

Inside, the henge was cool, dry and so whist one could hear the blood rush through her head. Gormglaith drew a breath. The whole far side was a sparkling sheet of sheer corundum beyond which windblown purple heath spread far and wide below into a silver haze over the kyle of Durness. Morigan, Rathyen, Morfyd and Tegan stood by steadfastly.

More than twelve dozen names were cut on pink granite slabs, in runes an inch high. Rathyen cast a straight arm.

17

Morigan Sparkenbane

Rathyen Raith Raine-Blairie

Morfyd Sparkenbane

Tegan Nichneven

Bairrfhionn Pane Aghadreen of the Greens

Gillian Goblyn

Gwenhwyfer Sparkenbane Bloor

Gormglaith Grendel Hafgan Halsen

Gormglaith got dimpled smiles from her plighted sisters. Her eyes seemed to linger on runes spelling *Devon Rand* at the last under sixteen, then settled back on her own, so freshly lasered.

They filed down a steep stairwell, hand in hand with hearts thumpering hard enough to be heard, through a narrow chute into the deep barrow opened only for Samhains, plights and scaanings. Its low hall was lit as if by moonbeams, dry, cool, dustless and slightly breezy with the shifting smells of juniper, old cottons, linens and natron. Here, on wide starry bluestone ledges at either side were more than twelve dozen mummies, each so smoothly wrapped in close strips of white or flaxen linen with swatched and hued bands about waists, lower thighs and shins, much like what had been left by Fidach Noichrothach. Many lay in bunches of fondness, some having done for thousands of years and whilst as wonted none bore any rune or hint of a name this stopped neither wanton guesses nor giggling.

Tegan eyed a bright, newish looking mummy with slanting, minch-blue and yellow stripes, then lankenly climbed up to straddle and cuddle it, sealing her lips over where a mouth might be. Pulling up with a grin, she rapped her knuckles thrice on its tummy between her thighs, which sounded like knocks on a thick bone board.

"With all these glassy rosins in twenty layers of strips," she said, "it's hard and tight as flyer skin, never mind what's inside's not much to worry about."

"Dost thou know who it was...?" asked Gormglaith, brow knitted.

"Mum's the word!" Tegan answered, winking.

"When *I* go," said Gwenhwyfer, "and they freeze dry 'n zap what's left of me into chalky sticks, they could put it... here!"

The banshee leapt onto a ledge between two other mummies with skeinishly woven bands, crossed reedy arms upon her figgen chest, trundled and swayed cozily, then threw her hands out towards Gormglaith, smirking.

"So 'glaithikins... ever jump marrow in the barrow?"

After which they all shared kisses fast among the echoes of aflliae.

Later the Sparkenbanes came outside to a slate stoep where a copper robot, its sleek skull, lanky frame and gait so wontedly hinting at girls' bones, brought heavy quartz tumblers. They sat facing each other on worn stone benches in a U, legs askew. Hair blustered in the wind and surf thundered against cliffs far below as Gormglaith, beside Gwenhwyfer, listened keenly with chin in hands, elbows on her knees.

"I was in the gwli by the garden flats," said Tegan, "leaning against the wall minding my own wyrd in a spog bit of shadow when these two scollies came and started talking like it was a hookup or something. Anyway I went with it. One of them was such a flirt, so pulling! She kept talking about her splits and how she'd breeze her boards like, slick as tears. So I asked why she didn't go for more rainbows. I wanna have *fun*, she said. Meanwhile the other'd gone way hush. At last she gets to asking, so, where dos'tha nest? Haethwyck, I told her and she said, how bash... so like, which one? Aspen, I said and she goes, oh wow... dreamy! Th'art nesties with Gillian... and Tegan then, huh? So is she bleeding swotbait like they say? And I said, feeps! Is that what they say about me? Heh heh. Much later she said, by the way, uhm, hey, I was only ranting about the breezing. That's ok, I told her. It's eggy, knowing thou canst breeze a little if thou wantst," said Tegan, gazing at Gormglaith, who squirmed on the bench, deep purple heath billowing behind her in the dusk.

"I want to be a scollagyn for the whole throw."

"I think it's cool..." Gillian put shyly, "...way."

"If that's thy braid my bat," said Rathyen with the wave of a scaanish hand, "it's our plait."

In the west, a sky fraught with broken clouds streaking off the Minch had gone ruddy pumpkin. Looking straight up they could see stars against dark blue whilst a waning moon climbed in the east and the stoep was swept with wide flashes of light which cast eyes and wan linen in a throbsome glow.

Nigh over their heads the beacon at Wrath ness ruddled ruthless and pink upon the eight plighted sisters as they stood in a ring, held hands and reeled slowly for a time, staring at each others' faces and they wept once, shrieked twice and drew together thrice in gathered pog.

frolic

The sky was stark and starry black, Neach beach drenched in moonlight, when Gormglaith walked alone through the runed door of Shenn Rhonwen's beach house to find Raohnailt and Blodwen still by the cozy board and bay window. A small lamp threw golden light on their faces as Gormglaith slid onto the blond wood chair.

"So what've y'all been up to whilst I was gone?" she asked, staring at a big frosted dish bearing two soggy looking brownies.

"We played fox 'n goose with Braith, gabbed mostly about thee... then binged more and saved two," said Raohnailt.

"Two...?" asked Gormglaith, eyeing them.

"Gormglaith's flurt," said Blodwen, nudging the dish towards her.

"If I must, then..."

Raohnailt and Blodwen traded glances.

"So!" said Raohnailt, smiling brightly.

Gormglaith nodded, mouth stuffed with brownie.

"Braith dished Geileis," lilted Blodwen, "...thou hag."

Gormglaith choked. Raognnailt waved her hands broadly mouthing, *I didn't know about Seosaimhthin!*

"I didn't know either," said Gormglaith, shaking her head, coughing with tears welling. "Bairrfhionn gabbed it yesterday... I did Findabair like Geileis did Seosaimhthin. I got what I wanted..."

"Thrills?" asked Blodwen, an eyebrow sharply winched.

Gormglaith sneered, sniffing and glancing at Braith who was huddled at a board with two maedchen, making surfing throws with her arms.

"I think I wanna be a surfer girl..." she said, wiping an eye with her palm.

Blodwen brooded over that.

"Takes too long to learn," she put. "How 'bout a moonlight swim?"

Gormglaith shook her head, ungrasping.

"Like to Iceland..." she said, flipping a nod towards the sea.

"...I mean, will it be breaststroke, or the crawl?"

Gormglaith sobbed, stared at pillywigginish Blodwen (who blinked elfen dark blue eyes with a thin lipped, dimpled grin), shoved her chair back and ran towards the door.

"No!" shouted Raognnailt, leaping after her.

"Haunt us when thou getst there," Blodwen said singsong, glancing after them and taking a sip of coffee.

Gormglaith tore into the moonlight, running across the sand with Raognnailt close behind.

"Gormglaith she knows I'll stop thee!"

"Thou canstn't stop me!"

"Then I'm coming with!"

In a sprinting burst, Raognnailt pounced on Gormglaith, flumping them both onto the sand.

"Let me go!"

"No!"

"Thou hag!"

"Shut up!"

"Get off!"

"Chill, Gormglaith!"

"Let me in the water and maybe I will!"

"Fy!"

Gormglaith dug in and clawed towards the roaring surf with Raognnailt wrapped snug on her back.

Wind howled off the cliffs as Blodwen stood in a moonbeam, unruffled, ever faaish and lithe with hinted smile, long thin braid falling by lofted cheekbone, arms at her sides, watching as Gormglaith and Raognnailt spun and struggled in the sand, screaming at each other.

Maevis and Njorthrbiartr walked up, both naked with hair flapping in the gale, to gape at the two writhing and spiderish, sand splattered scollagyn crabbing a few yards from the foggy water's edge.

"What's this," asked Maevis, "...beach blanket bingo?"

Blodwen cast a whist and dimpled grin.

"Kewl. See ya inside then."

Blodwen and Njorthrbiartr knelt beside Gormglaith and Raognnailt who now gripped each other in breathless, heaving weariness, waves lapping at their hair.

"Guorundottirs are wontedly way stern..." said Blodwen.

"Huh?" exhaled Raognnailt, sprawled upon Gormglaith.

"...It's a bit far though, i'nit."

"Oh... spog. Hey Gormglaith, can we stop now? I don't think Blodwen wants thee to swim to Iceland anymore."

On her back, flopping arms to her sides on the sand, Gormglaith looked straight into the stars, barely making her breath.

"My luzz," said Blodwen.

"...What?" asked Gormglaith between nettled gasps, pulling herself up, hair dripping with wet sand.

"She says it's her rundle now!" Raognnailt shouted over the din of crashing waves, on her knees, beetling ribs and hip bones scooped under rumpled white longstockings slathered with pink sand batter. "To die or whatever!"

"Blodwen thou art so bloody bane!" screamed Gormglaith, rising to her feet, sweeping and flicking sand from her arms.

"As if thou didstn't try to throw thyself in the Minch! Dost tha always do what th'art told?"

"Way fook!" yelled stark Njorthrbiartr as breakers slammed into the nearby rocks.

With twiggen right arm Blodwen thrust a heavily weighted knife high above her head, its wicked titanium blade gleaming hard and fast in the harvest moonlight. Holding up her left palm, she put the blade to it and swiped straight down.

Blood welled slow and blue black from Blodwen's still raised palm as she thrust the knife handle towards a gaping Raognnailt.

"Wouldst thou do this for me, Rag?"

"...As if," sighed Raognnailt, carefully taking it and setting the keen edge on her own left palm.

"...Never mind any thanks for tellin' me first thou hag."

With knitted brow she made a short pull... and grimaced.

"Njorthrbiartr!" shouted Blodwen, warding the blade straight up and straight armed at Njorthrbiartr who by now had reedy arms folded close across her chest, shivering with teeth chattering, wild eyed and nodding battishly.

Njorthrbiartr eagerly glommed and snatched the knife from Raognnailt. Raising the blade over her outstretched, chalken and shuddering palm, she made ready to strike.

"Take heed!" yelled Raognnailt as all three rushed in and held on tight to Njorthrbiartr's shaking forearms and wrists, then helped nudge the blade gently across the sheer skin of her now steadied hand.

As more blood flowed, Njorthrbiartr jerked up her white haired head with dish-eyes alit and stiffly warded the knife handle to Gormglaith who grasped it and slowly brought bloody blade to upraised palm.

"The scythe reaps!" shrieked Njorthrbiartr.

"*What* art thou waiting for?" yelled Blodwen, stomping sand.

"Do it Gormglaith! Oh please!"

Now it was scaanish Gormglaith who stood shaking in moonbeams, half soaked and caked with sand, chest heaving, cheeks drenched, thatch blowing bleakly across her face and gripping the knife to her palm so hard, the bones in her knuckles shone.

"Everyone says th'art so too stern," shouted Blodwen, "but in thoughts they ask, 'Thou tellst the tale, but canst thou cut to the pith! Celt slut!'"

"Wouldst thou flee my only troth?" wailed Raognnailt, beseeching her with bloodied palm. "Oh Gormglaith!"

"Together we bleed!" Njorthrbiartr screeched up at the moon, whirling.

"Fuck!" screamed Gormglaith, squashing her eyes shut as she yanked the blade.

"...Ay!"

The knife tumbled down between them, stabbing into the sand with a *shunk*. Meanwhile Blodwen drew a bloody palm across her mouth, leaving behind a wide swath of dark red as the others did likewise. Lifting a sandy eyebrow, the pillywiggin scollagyn cast a dimpled and smeared smile.

"Now then my bats," she sang breezily, leaning forth and spreading hands afar. "By braided blood of kin and kynn, this... is our handfasting."

"Knotty girls..." said Raognnailt, grinning a teary, crimson scythe and lifting her arms. "Together now!"

*Our bleeding flock be true and girt
We plait as one with Wyrd!
By braided blood of kin and kynn
This is our handfasting!*

So they all flung their arms towards the stars and clasped and held and squeezed left hands together one after the other and spun and screamed the words until they were wordless, falling onto the sand with long wailing shrieks like the wind in shared blood and pog to weep under the pulling moon.

Under a bright light strip in the otherwise darkened kitchen behind Shenn Rhonwen's, wrapped snug in striped wool blankets they sat about a titanium board, still damp, sandy, much bloodied, teary eyed and giddy as Mab healed four bony hands with Braith and Maevis hovering in the shadows nearby.

"Do you have any notion how dodgy this kind of thing is?" asked the air witch, shaking her head. "You could have asked me and I'd have made neat little nicks for you... or at least shown you *how*... and given you a fit blade. What'd you do this with, a bloody cleaver? Something tells me some wicked old woodshee knife is making its slippery way about the teach. Has it got a heart on the handle or what? I can only hope y'all won't *ever* do this again. What am I saying. As if you'd do it again... Blodwen this is *deep*! Wiggle thy fingers then..."

Blodwen answered with reeling fingers and a dimpled red grin.

Grasp was lit in bright, true hues under the stars. Ghosted runes shimmered through sparkling shop windows. Streetlights topped with blue rings threw beams like the moon's upon flat cobblestones where windblown, pink red dead leaves rustled in waves. Yggdrasil ribbons still fluttered about the ash tree as five bats flittered through the nearby cast of a green apple. By the glassy nest flats a shop called *Slank snaie* spilled purple black light on the lane from behind sheer corundum where four stark wraiths with hip length, blazingly freaked hair sulked against a frosty pink wall. Nigh was *Frolic* with its blue, green and yellow spots of light splashing skeinishly against wan feldstone and granite walls thick with shrubs and storms of daisies. Paestin and spindly Myghin stood by its brightly latticed doors.

From the west a silvery sled with fuzzy pumpkin hued lights grew out of the sea mist and glid into the thorpe, sliding to a stop in front of them. Maevis and Njorthrbiartr stepped out onto the walk's glowing, underlit quartz bricks as Raognnail, Gormglaith and Blodwen followed. Maevis looked up and down a foggy, empty thorpe lane.

"It's canny packed," Myghin put with a toss of her head.

"Gasping, Gormglaith," said Paestin, nodding.

"A reeling flock would've shown up much later," said Myghin.

"Seems thou'rt the... 'it' girl," said Maevis, buoyantly putting a forefinger on the bridge of Gormglaith's nose.

By the mazy doors stood an upended besom, its yard-long spray of gathered Highlands heather tightly braided and sewn with black linen string to a shorter handle of bare white ash lasered with runes. Beyond, dozens of hued beams swirled upon swatched slate. The scollagyn were met by a shee named Tuuliki whose ginger hair was sprinkled with twinkling stars and fell to rail hips. The wrap of her black longstockings sparkled too with tiny blinks of shifted black light.

"Hi Gormglaith!" she said in a Lapplandish tongue, putting forth a knobby hand which gripped a big, floppy sky blue daisy, sun yellow in the middle with a deep green stem.

"Merry flurt!"

"Hey..." said Gormglaith, taking the daisy and smelling it.

"...Ta!"

"Are we ready?" asked Maevis, shedding her cutty sark.

The nesties and Tuuliki pulled Gormglaith gasping and giggling to her feet on hollow black wooden reeling klompen. Her toes were warded straight down like a fylgjie reeler's though by sly craft they bore little of Gormglaith's eight stone. She fell sideways, eeking as Raoghnailt and Maevis spotted her. In flats she stood over six feet tall but in these she was more than seven. Meanwhile feet verily melded with shins whilst thighs were so taut her bottom seemed one with them. She thrust out her rear and chest, flung her arms then lurched, screeched and grinned, wary to budge. Giggles and shrieks flew from all as she took her first short, stiff steps.

Swirling light beams and strobes played and flashed to a steady beat across an empty reel rink about which girls had gathered in clumps, knots and yokes, some seated at boards and risers, others standing or mingling among dozens of scollagyn, shees and clanniners with haunted eyes beneath cuts and hues of hair ribboned, braided and shaved, tailed or loose. Linens were more often flued than not and warded bare chests over snug wraps pleated, bedecked, hemmed or folded. A few slouchy, skeletal robots wandered here and there handing out tumblers of icy fizz in frosty shades.

The air grew thick with a thrilling smell of slattag ghlass and cairmeal as Raohnailt, Gormglaith and Myghin showed up on the rink. By most tellings Gormglaith staggered brat swank with blue daisy in hand, white longstockings so rimples behind the knees. They reached a shallow riser in front of sweeping, wefted windows. Lights whirled to a stark back beat as the threesome, each with chin length haircuts, did the shawn trews, that early clannin reel at which girls get their kicks by braiding arms in a row and doing them the Highlands way, shallow, weftish and fast.

Loud clapping cracked on the down strokes as strobes and beams swerved and blinked. Raohnailt glanced at Gormglaith and they broke into witchy grins when girls streamed onto the rink arm in arm to reel likewise, their clapping now a thunderous clopping of klompen. Dream beats shivered, then arms dropped to sides and all reeled the spinning shawn trews. Gormglaith was as yet a bit awkward, still learning to toe jig, hemmed in by her nesties to forfend any fall when Ffion wove through this clutch. Hanging over her heart by a linen neck strap was an egg-like glain glowing frostily sky blue. Her mouth flashed sparky white as she spoke.

"Hey Gormglaith, merry flurt! We've been set up! Is this wanton or what?"

Gormglaith put forth the daisy which Ffion took with both hands, cramming it against her face and platinum ringed nose, sniffing deep, after which she shoved the daisy in her mouth and ate it, looking upon Gormglaith's eyes with a sway most girls would think fit whilst eating a daisy. Ffion dropped the green stem, stepped in close to Gormglaith, flashed a big toothed smile then kissed and felt her up.

"Oh 'glaithikins is it true?" asked Ffion, mouth flashing close by thatchen ear. "Is this thy first or hast thou done it with Findabair and Gweneth?"

Gormglaith looked at Ffion as if to say, *Like, whatev, 'k?*

Ffion crinkled her nose, stepped out of wooden klompen and dropped to bony knees. She unhooked the glain from its strap, gripped and nudged it still glowing betwixt scaanish thighs, delved middle finger deep into the feely gadget then glued her open mouth onto Gormglaith's cleft in the flue and with cheeks drawn, pulled a wet and craven pog.

Gormglaith threw her head back with a shriek, straight legs stiffening on downcast toes. Looking to Raohnailt for help she got a gabbish tongue in the ear. Yodels and light swirled about them as Raohnailt kissed crush, Myghin latched and Ffion drew lappishly whilst deftly fingering the glain. Gormglaith grasped and clasped them all, searching for a grip when her knees gave way. She sobbed and stared up into the swerving lights, tears streaming down her face. She smiled, blinked, then tightly closed her eyes, teeth bared as the thews of her pelvis, thighs and womb threw clapping, raining throes.

That's about when she screamed.

Throbbish beats gathered with swiveling beams. She was leaning heavily on Raohnailt and Myghin when white haired Ffion stood with a wry smile, face and longstockings soaked, holding the glowing glain loosely at her side. Bearing a startled look, eyebrows aloft, Gormglaith gaped at the scollagyn.

Nobody heard the words shaped by Ffion's red-smeared and flashing mouth as she kissed air, hopped back into klompen, cast a swotty wave and spun into the reel. Raohnailt led a limp and staggering Gormglaith off the rink.

"Faeries wept!" Gormglaith babbled, shaking her head.

"...Bloody nick!"

Meanwhile two nimble robots whisked from the floor a puddle of wan gold hovering upon a red dash of blood (along with the daisy stem).

Bairrfhionn, spiderish in black and on reeling klompen, lankily steadied herself at the edge of a riser, wispy red hair all askew about her knees bending light to pumpkins and pinks. She watched Gormglaith's bottom weave maedchenly into a flock of scollagyn as three dozen beams spun and flung to the yodeled beat.

They sat Gormglaith on a low bench. Raohnailt settled at her hip as Myghin wove into the reelers. Dish eyed and still catching her breath, she laid her head back on the flagstone wall. Raohnailt threw a mirthful glance and they broke out giggling. Gormglaith gazed about whilst girls frolicked, ranted and whirled. Gillian, her hair now cunningly braided with black light shifting gibecrake, twisted in a skeinish throng of scollagyn, shees and clanniners with Eiric flailing flax faeire calls earnestly nigh a reeling Gaid. Near them a stringy braided mae-

gden, her rust hair shaved off to the eartops, cradled within skinny arms the head of a scollagyn who, with yellow braids spun once each in a wreath over her forehead, had latched a figgish breast wholly into her mouth. A yard away Maevis and Paestin were utterly twined about each other in slow reel and fast pog, hair flowing in bane blond strands down their backs. On risers some knelt astride besoms, writhing face to face. Here was Gwenhwyfer in ash longstockings, open fingered arm-gloves and sparkling red klompen, her yellow, white freaked locks swept forward and littered with blinking black lit daisies. She wept, looked down and bit her lip, clutching a head of blond brindled blue black hair between straight and slender thighs. Gormglaith clawed hand into lap and was bucking her hips when Njorthrbiartr and Blodwen twirled off the rink, tousled and sweaty. She was still wrapped in Raohnnailt's arms, staring at her sobbing plighted sister, when Tuuliki came by with four tumblers of golden red fizzy along with four short ones throwing off a mossy and glassish hue.

"Glen drammane," said Tuuliki, "ginger crush back. Blodwen asked if I might slash them myself," she called out, breezing away.

"Hast tha done this before?" Raohnnailt asked brightly.

"Not."

Gormglaith charily eyed the short tumbler, sniffing it.

"It's but a canny eald barley malt then!" Raohnnailt shouted above shimmering sparks of yodeling.

"Uhm... isn't this stuff a wee bit hard, Raohnnailt?"

"That's the pith!"

Gormglaith looked at Blodwen and got a dimpled, steadfast nod. Raohnnailt put her mouth to Gormglaith's ear.

"...'been ninety-three years in bane oak, so swan out, wait for the kick 'n have some fun! ...'k, ready y'all?"

Raohnnailt raised her tumbler.

Gormglaith shrugged, Blodwen and Njorthrbiartr grinned scythes.

"One... two... three... gollop!"

"...Aye!" wailed Raohnnailt, eyes crossing.

Gormglaith gasped.

They splayed and braided together as reelish beats, girls and light throbbed by, dozens of tales unfolding in the crush. Creiddyladl and Feegan threw flax faerie calls from afar. At last each stood stalk straight but for bowed head hidden in hands to throw *flax weeping*, a true throe only when tears fall wet on the deck, as theirs did.



Creiddyladl | flax weeping

Blodwen sprang up and with a witchy smirk, bobbing head tilted, pulled Gormglaith from her seat by both hands, towing her along straight armed as Raognnailt shoved from behind. They came to a riser with four upended besoms leaned against it in a tidy row. Blodwen lit aloft, took one (which by the bye was taller than she was) then swept thrice, sunwise and outward. She knelt astride the runed ash handle and they all giggled as Gormglaith lankily climbed up, lowered to her knees and threw a gangling leg over the yard of bundled heather to face Blodwen and straddle before her, snugly sharing less than two feet of runed handle. Blodwen reached by Gormglaith's waist for the besom's tautly plaited braid and tugged up neatly, making her laugh. Then she wriggled.

"Oh!"

Gormglaith squealed, jumped and bounced back onto the white ash handle, thatch flying, eyes big and bright as the besom fell with a clatter between their shins. Taking up the braid once more, Blodwen pulled Gormglaith's right hand, put it in a steadfast grip on the very end of the handle hard behind her own pillywiggin bottom, grasped Gormglaith's waist and wriggled again.

"Blodwen!"

She glanced at Raohnailt beside her, entwined and swaying in a yoke with Njorthrbiartr astride another besom. Raohnailt, head on Njorthrbiartr's shoulder, gazed at Gormglaith, grinning wickedly and wide.

Gormglaith cuddled nimble Blodwen and whispered in her ear.

"I think this is driving me crazy."

"Wraithen!"

With kisses and nudges, eyebrow tugging thoughts, wiggles and squirms they fetched and made their ways. Held in Njorthrbiartr's damp and clingsome clasp, Raohnailt began to pant and flailed her right arm, groping. She found Gormglaith's left hand and set off on a screaming spell of jerking, floppy boppins whilst tightly gripping bony hands with her and trundling ash. Blodwen, eyes wilding, held fast to besom and Gormglaith, sandy hair tumbling over them both.

"No worries Gormglaith," sang Blodwen in a close hug, "I'll always be there for thee, yodelin' *forever Findabair* in thy craven ear. Meanwhile I knew we were birds of a feather the first night I laid eyes on thee and in a moon I'll have us both ben chee enough for my Rag."

Blodwen thrust her back by the shoulders and fell forward in a yawning, sealed latch upon her chest, pulling and drawing steadily however a scaanish Gormglaith might twist or rundle. Later they folded and wrapped blearily together, gasping for breath, limbs and besoms in a heap, long heather bundles warded askew.

"There's nothing else," came a silvery tongue close by, "like the sight of zombie scollies after besom rides, knackered limp in each others arms..."

Morfyd and Morigan stood nigh, way twin in black longstockings and plump, bighty pumpkin hued klompen, daisies shifting black light in their hair.

"So, would y'all like to hang with us on the stoep for a snack and a bit of fresh air?" asked Morfyd, thumbing over her shoulder.

Her face half hidden in lank straw blond thatch, Gormglaith gazed back at them in utter befuddlement.

a fettle nest

Gormglaith shoved back her thatch and sucked in crisp air as they came out onto the back garden close through a sliding window. When it shut, any sound from inside was hushed, leaving only rushes of wind from across the moors and far off surf pounding below the cliffs.

She glanced, then stared stonily at a hard white clunch carving called *Frolic*, of two girls so lifelike, throwing flax faerie calls in front of laser beams, their sundry shifting hues soaring up through the clouds. One stood in reeling klompen, gazing off towards the Minch and waning moon, arms outstretched as if to yodels in a ranting flax blossom and looking rather like Morigan or Morfyd. Before her knelt another with two long braids, head tossed back and lips afar, flingin' flax in a wicked swoon. Gormglaith whirled about to Raohnailt, wide eyed.

"That," said Raohnailt, "is a twenty-third shenn of mine, Dairine Ban Grendel Sparkenbane, first braid of the cracking 3245bn tide and thy close kin about a hundred sundry ways but that's no trick."

"Try a million," put Gormglaith with a wraithen smirk.

They sat in moonlight among boards haunted by shees, scollagyn and some clanniners. The chill of a brisk westerly breeze was stayed by red heat lights on tall slender poles as a slouchy robot ticked off sundry fizz and coffee.

Morigan leaned forward chummishly, chin in hands.

"So little sister, how's thy flurt been then?"

"A scream," Gormglaith answered from behind a stray lock of thatch as she pulled on the wanly glowing cutty sark a robot had brought her.

"We didn't see y'all..." said Raoghnailt, wagging a finger.

"You were *lashed* thou little hash! So Gormglaith," Morigan said magpie, "I'd have thought it was thy first..."

"Rather."

"Clannin girl," put Morigan, nodding and sitting back.

"Hey..." said Gormglaith, rapping fingers on the board, chin length thatch sweeping forward.

"...I'd have done anyway and frickin' soon."

"Clannin girl," echoed Morfyd, shrugging as everyone laughed.

"Findabair?" asked Morigan, eyebrows raised and hair swishing.
"With a glain, uhm, 'borrowed' from someone's kynn?"

Gormglaith gazed back, tossed a framey shoulder and took up a ginger crush.

"...Dank," said Morigan.

The robot brought glion groudle pye. Heaping, cheesy wedges of leaf, root and berry were tugged, pulled and shoved into hungry mouths.

"This is dish..." Gormglaith mumbled, mouth full.

"Speaking of which," said Morfyd, "thy shenn Grainne haunted us this evening."

Gormglaith stopped mid-chew.

"Yeah," Morfyd carried on, deftly plying a sagging slice. "Grainne knows everybody."

She waved her hand and took a sunken cheeked bite.

"How long have you known her?"

"Oh, since we were little. If kin Grendel have something to say, Grainne's the one!"

"So what," asked Gormglaith, taking another sip of ginger crush, "did kin Grendel have to say tonight?"

"We'd been back from the henge but for a tick. 'Sparkenbanes,' she said and thou knowst how she is, 'Sparkenbanes I only wanted to say you're all in our thoughts and Gormglaith's kynn, who weep for her, wouldn't mind if she called!'"

"We told her thou wast likely to, that it's flurt and thou hadst thy first thing. She said she was thrilled, then brought up the wheat freayll. She'd already heard!"

"Uh oh."

"Her take on thy helpful wyrd was rather keen," said Morigan. "She barely kept a grip."

"Fuck!" said Gormglaith, burying head in hands. "This is ladgeful! I henge banshee on Sunaneve and Monandaeg shee bannee mee Grainne blurt to *quicken* one of the leegest freaylls ever. Weepin' wombats! What'll Enid say?! Fy! Flann! Morigan thou fingering hag how in the bloody wyrd couldst thou let me *do* such a thing?!"

"I told thee to shirk off!" said Morigan, wagging cheekbones.

"No worries, Gormglaith," put Blodwen, head bobbing.

"They'll grok soon enough..." said Morfyd.

"...and the ruck who don't can suck snow," put Morigan, waving a hand.

Gormglaith looked up at the twins.

"The air witch found like, this hark in my braid yesterday."

Njorthrbiartr froze, slice of pye before her mouth.

"We heard!" answered Morfyd.

"So we asked," said Morigan. "The blood witch who tided thee grows new limbs in Fen Glioon these moons. Branwen told Mab... thy kynn asked for the hark and when she hacked it Grainne Grendel was there, at her shoulder. She says her flash on it's likely spot on since it was the first 'n last hark she ever sewed."

Gormglaith looked off towards moon and Minch.

"Uhm... Gormglaith," said Morigan. "I mean, yeah, tha knowst we gave thee 'n Raoghnailt the wee nudge at Fen Glioon but it never was about Geileis, nor Grainne by the bye."

"Tell me when I swoon, 'k?"

Gormglaith cast a bladed look, straw thatch swinging by her face.

"*Whatever for?*" Morigan whispered, shaking her head, glancing about the close as she rose from the board, pursed her lips in a blown kiss and walked off whilst Gormglaith gaped.

"...and this nest ...is incest," Njorthrbiartr sang under her breath, words from Kied Keel's *Third braid*.

Gormglaith twirled to the reedy scollagyn as the twin stopped still at the far end of the close to stare into starry sky, black light shifting daisies in stormy, wind tossed hair.

"It's ok," Morfyd said airily, tackling another slice of pye. "She'll be back!"

"I'm gonna talk to her," said Raognnailt, getting up and lurching away in short quick steps over the hard echoing bonk of reeling klompen.

Gormglaith gazed at Raognnailt's dwindling bottom, cast her eyes down and wept, muttering,

"Botch botch botch botch botch..."

"We grew up in Glas knoll!" Morfyd put cheerfully. "Spoiled rotten, I should think! Morigan and I even spoke in our own tongue 'till we were five."

Gormglaith looked up with wet cheeks.

"Nobody understood a word of it! Our drift to please stirred us to gab English like anyone else and the other slipped away. I rather miss it sometimes. When we were maedchen we tore through Kin Dails with Rathyen learning to be bats and spooks. That's how we first met thy Giorsal and Geileis by the way. Graih too! We wontedly hung out at rinks and feishes, stuff like that. Morigan and I were maegden in Weodmonath of '67 with a reeling birthday flurt at Glas Knoll... the whole knot came! I won't forget that summer. Late afternoons were hazy and moody with lochshore swims, wicked dreamy walks by mead 'n wood, lurks in keen haunts, the short nights cool and breezy, dishin' over endless games of fox 'n goose. That's how I recall it anyway and it was one midnight in the gather lair when Morigan said something we've both since forgotten. I looked at her and asked, 'Dost thou have a clue?'"

A gaggle of giggles took flight.

"'I don't know,' Morigan said, gawking at me like I'd done her hello lizzy which indeed I had."

"So I got up, stamped my foot and said, 'Morigan Sparkenbane don't be so dull. I know thou'st got a clever mind, I've the same kind. Why thou dostn't spin it sometimes amazes me.'"

"She still says that!" said Njorthrbiartr, bringing laughter.

Morigan, wiping tears and sniffing, came back with Raohnailt (who slid next to Gormglaith with a trusty nod).

"Hey Mirchick," said Morfyd, taking her twin's hand as she sat down. "I've been dishing about us!"

"Ok, so Morigan's zombied and I heap it on thick. 'Thou worry'st me,'" Morfyd carried on, hands on hips, spoofing her maegden self.

"It's a drag! Meanwhile if thou thinkst I'm gonna like, swoon *out* over bein' the flippin' henge twin, th'art daft!"

Gormglaith squished her eyes shut and mouthed, *Bumpkin!*

Morigan smiled wanly.

"I burst into tears and ran off! I wept and bled in a corner of the bath, got bored, came out, plopped down next to Morigan and sat sullen, watching ghosts."

"Thou stuckst thy tongue out at me," Morigan said softly.

More snickers flitted among them.

"I did! I still do! Rather like thee!"

"Anyway, then Morigan's weeping too. 'What!' I said and Morigan said, 'I'm sorry,' so I said, 'If th'art not sorry thou bloody wilt be...'"

Morfyd grinned at Gormglaith, a skinny arm wrapped close about her squirming plighted twin whom she then pogged with a breathless, damp eyed latch.

"...k," said Gormglaith. "I'm gonna puzzle. I mean, what *if*... "

"...Thou'dst nixed?" asked Morigan (after steadying herself with a quick gasp for air).

"Yeah."

"...and plighted Pane?"

Gormglaith nodded.

"*If*'s a small word with a big tale, tha knowst? Nonetheless, maybe we'd have gotten to know thee anyway in Kin Dails or Fen Glicoon as the lekker tongue witch. In the meantime Blodwen here was ready to pli..."

"Oh Blodwen...!"

"Such fuss," sighed Blodwen, shrugging a chalky pillywiggin shoulder. "Gormglaith was born to plight Sparkenbanes..."

"...and Blodwen does a wicked crawl."

She reached across and took the last slice of glion groudle pye.

Sometime later the four scollagyn huddled at a board towards the rear of *yn Bleihder bowling*, a sleek coffee den and snug bowling gwli half buried in the peat, its inner blond wood walls swathed low with light from pumpkin red neon. Three dozen girls flocked about six lanes and at boards, on stools at the yew wood fare shelf, or milled. Here again was Gwenhwyfer, now unshod in ash longstockinged feet, slipping two long, sturdy, black nailed fingers and thumb into a bowling ball deeply inner lit by swirls of black light shifted blue, green and white which she lifted slowly to a steadfast and strongly carved chin. Her nose ring glittered in platinum gleam as from the dark shadows of sunken sky blue eyes Gwenhwyfer stitched a wicked gaze over glowing ball and beyond to a shining, hard, utterly smooth yew and pine lane. The banshee strode forward to let fly and rundle the trundling rumble, left leg thrust out then held straight in the air far behind as nimble fingers runed an open sided gore over her heart, palm inward, deft stereo stare thrown so keenly forward. To the clatter and tumble of white ten pins she kicked a quick shawn trews in a shower of screeches, squeals and clapping.

"What?!" shouted Gormglaith, spinning heads as she put hand to mouth. With her eyes darting about, she pulled forward in a whisper.

"She said *that*?"

Raognnailt shrugged, taking a sip of hot chocolate.

"Raognnailt?! I'm barely a scollagyn!"

"*Barely*'s kinda lean as shades go, 'glaithen," said Raoghnailt, lowering her mug. "Tha knowst?"

"Minding our own..." sang Blodwen.

Gormglaith stared at Blodwen as Njorthrbiartr giggled.

"Scollies spin, 'glaithikins," Njorthrbiartr put with a witchy grin, rapping close clipped white nails on wood, "a fettle nest of fylgia."

"I am *such* a slacker," sighed Raoghnailt, chin in hands. "I mean, even if she is a ranting srike hag, at seventeen Njorthrbiartr was already witch of *Eachdrai*- uh oh..."

A scollagyn wearing chalken Glen pelyn longstockings along with black reeling klompen, yellow braids twining a wreath about her forehead over a face perhaps more thewisch than wonted, had snared everyone's heed. She stood stiff between boards and shelf, tears slipping down her cheeks by ash blackened lips, facing a taller maegden garbed alike and whose rust hair fell in dozens of short, way thin braids.

"Thou'st gone *lass*? Gearan this is so *fricking* leeg."

Rusty Gearan met this tearful bait with the taut stare of bright brecken eyes. The yellow braided scollagyn answered by casting her arms out and forward, fingers beckoning, head thrown to the side, chin down, mouth agape and with stalking, keen grey eyes glomming up at Gearan in a way tough flax blossom, which brought more than a few gasps.

"Get a *grip*, Tryffin," said Gearan. "Look, I'll see thee... later, 'k?"

She walked out, stringy braids flying, leaving Tryffin throwing at air. The scollagyn dropped her arms and watched forlorn as the glassy door slid shut.

"Thou bloody hag!" she screamed, bent over.

Her answer was a shower of shushes.

"Tryffin!" someone called in a chiding whisper.

Tryffin spun about, glanced at Gormglaith and looked away in tears. Climbing onto a stool she raised a coffee mug, smacked it on the yew, put braided head in hands and sobbed.

"Who is she?" whispered Gormglaith.

"...Hurtleberry nest, clannin girl from Fen Glioon... sly at spells," said Raoghnailt, nodding.

"She looks racked."

"Rather. Someone'll scoop her up. Crush tears, tha knowst? I think she gets homesick, too."

Very soon a scollagyn with blue black and ash striped hair falling straight to her bottom came in and made for Tryffin, clambering onto a stool beside her.

Raoghnailt lifted her chin to the hollow, clacking peal of scattering ten pins with more squeals and cheers.

"Kewl... Goewin's here. They're nesties."

As they left Gormglaith grinned and tapped Tryffin's shoulder. The red eyed scollagyn twirled her head, jaw dropping as Gormglaith held out a hand.

"Hi!"

"Hi," said Tryffin, a feaze cast in yellow braided wreath.

"I'm Gormglaith. What's thy name?"

"I'm Tryffin..." she said, taking Gormglaith's hand.

"Anyway I'm so sorry to trample but I wanted to thank thee for coming to my flurt and also... I mean, we saw thee over at Frolic and I flip for thy braids. They're eggy!"

Tryffin glanced to the side and cast a shy smile (with a snuffle), nose ring glittering.

"Ta! I like thy thatch, too."

"Ta... but I know it's rather a mess, huh?"

"Aye, it's cool."

"Yah!..." she sighed, then blurted out, "Tryffin Sparkenbane someday I'm gonna grow my hair and have swank brat braids like thine."

"Gormglaith Sparkenbane," said Raoghnailt as they clopped noisily across the flatstones towards Frolic and a sled with pumpkin lights blinking, "thou wast like, born to banshee."

Gormglaith looked straight ahead with a wry smile, straw thatch blowing in the sea breeze as they broke out giggling and bunched into the waiting sled.

Haethwyck was hushed and dimmed when, still before sunrise they walked into birch nest which was empty but for Morfyd and Morigan fast asleep on their sides, unshod in rumpled and rimpled black longstockings. Their facial sways were alike but not at all the same. Gormglaith, Raognailt, Blodwen and Njorthrbiartr crawled onto the sprawling staddle, cuddled up in a warm clump limbs askew and fell into gathered slumber.

Shining moonlight beamed through the tall windows when a wailing, warping shriek echoed in the hall and Gormglaith's eyes flew open, ribs heaving beneath Glen pelyns as spots of light popped on.

Morigan was crawling wildly on all fours, screaming.

"It's nothing," Blodwen said evenly. "...*Nothing*."

Gormglaith rose to her knees in full heed, quickly glanced about, then looked at Raognailt open mouthed.

"She does that," said Raognailt as she lay on her side watching Morigan grope and screech under a tangle of honey blond hair.

"Bloody flurt..." whispered Gormglaith when the twin came full stop, stared up at her aghast, then fell and buried her face in gaunt, veined hands.

"Morigan!"

Njorthrbiartr rocked back and forth in an upright wombish throe, dish eyed.

"I flip when she does that! Ripping show, Morigan!"

The twin lay still on blue black cotton.

"Sorry Gormglaith," she said at last, trundling onto her back, looking up at the boxed and woven wood craft overhead. "I won't do it again."

"Codswallop," said Morfyd, rising up on elbows and rubbing her eyes.

"What was it? What happened?" asked Gormglaith, shaking her head and catching breaths.

"Nothing..." Morigan sighed wearily, still gazing at the inlays far above.

"Tell her," Morfyd said flatly.

Drumming clucks with her tongue to cut the lights she plopped back onto the throw pillows.

On her knees, Gormglaith scooted across to Morigan and hovered in the moonlight.

"Was it a dream?"

"I was dreaming," said Morigan, "something. I opened mine eyes and the light was casting shapes on the wall, there," she nodded.

Gormglaith glanced at the granite, tapestried wall with moonlit shadows from the skeinishly paned window and looked back ungrasping.

"I didn't know what they were, ok?" Morigan answered with an uncanny gaze. "I didn't know who I was."

Morfyd burrowed deeper into the pillows.

"Yeah," Morigan sighed. "She doesn't do it nearly as often but they say we've all done it, each and every one of us back to bloody Erin herself if thou mustest know and it means aught. It's some kind of offbeat snap in the awakenin' noggin or whatever and it weaves with *nothing*. 'k?"

"I knew that," said Gormglaith. "I mean, not about you two but... I knew she did that."

"Thou'rt still rather green, artn't thou?" said Morigan, flopping over and folding up. "Go back to sleep, Gormglaith."

Raoghnailt and Blodwen tugged her wordlessly away.

"Her first time asleep with thee," Raoghnailt barely whispered upon a breath, mouth close by Gormglaith's ear, "and she pulls that. Thou canst only guess how she feels."

Njorthrbiartr giggled, leaping on all fours over Morigan, straddling and rubbing a keen beat against her hip.

Raoghnailt nuzzled into Gormglaith's neck as Blodwen wet kissed her and dropped like a leaf on the two of them.

neach beach

Late afternoon brought spackled hues of splayed light streaming into birch nest. Gormglaith woke up when Raognnailt stirred behind her, sighed and tightened her grip with reedy arms.

"How'dst tha sleep?"

Gormglaith trundled over. Raognnailt's face was puffy from slumber, flaxen hair kerfuffle, eyes periwinkle blue and brightening. Gormglaith squinted across the cozily sleek, sprawling lair and settled a gaze back on Raognnailt.

"Like a stone."

She plopped her head down, straw blond thatch hiding her face.

"So Bairrfhionn was here a little while ago. She didn't want to wake thee but said... 'Tell the wicked witch she might haunt the dens after she's had breakfast.' Rhiamon Rush has been bamfing in and out asking for thee and I think they want to like, clue thee in before thou meetst the hag."

The thatch didn't stir for some time.

Morfyd, Morigan and Gormglaith walked briskly through a golden pumpkin yew swatched hall in the dens.

"Rhiamon Rush," said Morigan. "168 last Aefterra litha, witch a dozen ways from hex to tongue and back to *Eachdraidh*."

"A Sleepinglander!" put Morfyd. "Brought in and raised at Rush bog teach on the western moors."

"She pledged there 151 years ago. Got herself shee and split rainbows as a broom witch in twenty-four moons. She's been at Toreth house in Snotra ever since."

"We think she sways lots of folks by bree and birr as much as anything else but inside that bouncy, beaty bat..."

"...dwells a weird and gripping mind," said Morigan.

They came to a dim cove of black feldspar walls hung with some Highlands tapestries. Inner lit white quartz bench blocks sat crosswise on the hornblende floor off either end.

"Do we have Maiden lane?" asked Morigan.

A life sized ghost bamfed in, of a girl somewhat over five feet tall, at six stone reedy and wan with laser straight but disheveled, deep dark black, blue freaked hair falling to her elbows, thick eyebrows above sly looking, bright fir green eyes and a squish, pushed up nose bearing a sparkling shee's ring above blackened lips. Wearing black longstockings under a natty black cutty sark with forearm-length sleeves showing swaddled, open fingered gloves, she stood in platinum edged, bighty black klompen.

The witch gave a startled gape and fluttered towards them like... a bouncy, beaty bat.



Rhiamon | bamfed in

She looked Gormglaith up and down, then gasped and threw a spray of ghosted white lily bits at her.

"Hey Rhiamon!" said Morigan. "This is..."

"Ok, ok Morigan," Rhiamon sighed, twirling her eyes. "Like the hobby henge twins haven't already told this one all about me. *Hi* Gormglaith!"

Rhiamon beamed.

"Hi..." said Gormglaith, staring at Rhiamon's klompen.

Rhiamon giggled, kicking out and holding up a toe-casting straight leg whilst standing way steady on the other.

"Keen, huh? Celtic! Very old!"

"Like my Grainne wears," said Gormglaith.

"I like thy cloppers," Rhiamon put with a smirk, nodding at the banshee's big, bright yellow wooden klompen with cheerfully hand drawn daisies.

"Ta! My kynn sent them!"

"We'll leave you to it then!" Morfyd called. "See ya!"

Gormglaith watched the twins walk out, then answered a tap on her shoulder. Rhiamon was waiting waggishly and Gormglaith faced her.

"Hi!"

"Hi!" said Gormglaith, shrugging and grinning wide.

Rhiamon put her face close to Gormglaith's with a frown (since the witch's ash blackened mouth fell abidingly to this and a smirk all at once). She took careful steps, staring in jerks at Gormglaith's nooks and crannies as the latest banshee of Wrath ness stood steadfastly by.

"Wow wow wow wow!" Rhiamon shouted, clapping hands together and twirling.

"I mean, I was ready for wraithen but not this!"

"Oh Rhiamon," sighed Gormglaith, "it's likely the cast, is all."

Rhiamon's eyes widened, then she looked down shyly.

"Gormglaith?"

"Rhiamon?"

"Dost tha like me?"

"I don't know thee yet..."

"Yeah but I mean, dost thou *like* me?" asked the witch, arms limp at her sides, peeking from behind a stray lock of black hair striped in many blues.

"Yes."

"Thou dost?!"

"Rather."

Rhiamon grinned and cast a glance skyward.

"Gormglaith Sparkenbane couldst thou help me out here?"

Gormglaith raised her hands and nodded.

"k'. So I've seen thy splits. I read the tale of thy plight to my torkin' nesties the other night as a bloody slumbertale with Erin Mynter's trigger spinnin' life sized on the deck and I did hear about thy feish in Grasp yesterday afternoon, dry latchin' Gumm bat 'n all. Girls like thee don't breeze and girls like me hackle girls like thee for lunch. Thou'st got something on thy mind and I want to know like... *what*," said Rhiamon, sunken fir green eyes like lasers, hands on bony hips.

"Hast thou read my clannin banns?"

Rhiamon seemed taken aback.

"...What. For Grasp? Why no, Gormglaith, I can't say I have."

"When thou'st done my bat, give us a call, 'k'?"

Gormglaith spun to walk off.

"Gormglaith! Gormglaith!" the witch called out, forefinger raised.

"What," she said, a lock of thatch sweeping across her right eye.

"I'll read it. Wait here, ok?"

"Now?!"

"The thing is, reading stuff with somebody looking over my shoulder gives me the weepy creeps. So I'm gonna go off cast and call up a goblin," she said, thumbing behind her, "Thingy watchyamacallit whatever... 'n be back in a tick... 'n meantime thou'lt hang thy sticks here, 'k'?"

"'k."

"Twixies!"

"Uh, yeah, ok, twixies."

"Kewl," said Rhiamon, smirking and snapping her fingers.

She glanced back and flashed a smile as her ghost bamfed out of sight.

"Hmph."

Shaking her head Gormglaith waved an arm and a black light shifted green goblin flew up as she straddled the glowing quartz bench.

She was reading, entwined and head down, when Rhiamon's ghost bamfed back. Heedfully, with witchy grin frozen on a beaming face, Rhiamon stepped out of her klompen and stalked slowly on her toes towards the banshee as if trying to keep in her blind spot. She reached Gormglaith's back, put plight-black mouth close to an ear hidden in thatch, tapped her shoulder and said,

"Foo!"

"Eek!"

Gormglaith sprang up as the goblin spewed thousands of glimmering runes in a fast dwindling cloud.

"Fy! Thou scared the feeps out of me!"

Rhiamon giggled.

"What is *with* thee?! Thou behave'st like a moppet!"

"Sorry," said Rhiamon, chided on one tick, barely hiding a smirk the next.

"Didst thou read it?"

The witch nodded brightly, like a moppet in early root.

"How couldst tha read it so fast?"

"Speedreader?" asked Rhiamon, making quick crosswise streaks with two fingers held close.

Gormglaith's eyes darted to the side and back again.

"So how 'bout it?"

"It sucks."

"It sucks..."

"Big icky trolls," Rhiamon put with eyes narrowing.

"Don't make me hurl," said Gormglaith, sneering and wheeling her hand.

"It's blur is all. I mean it's fylgjc, but heedless."

"That's what I thought."

"Ok," said Rhiamon, blinking once.

"'k, so... why is it heedless?"

"TOSS. Tongue OffSet Slip, mostly. It happens all the time."

"...It happens all the time."

"The broom's a craft of heed, speed 'n spell, whist, folk 'n freayll," Rhiamon put with the shrug of a twig shoulder.

"Yeah but it's still a wacking heedless bloody clannin banns, i'nit."

"...More like a wacking heedless bloody *fylgjc* clannin banns."

"Whatever...!?"

"Gasping, Gormglaith..." said the witch, wagging her head. "...Ok, tongue craft is ears and eyeballs stuff, barely fit for tangling fussy, boppin' girlware. Meanwhile Maiden lane's toaster bait and the two don't mix, never have done but, pinks make girlware *think* as though they mix or even grok, say, if the girlware tweedles about with some daft notion, by pingin' her with a hello lizzy or whatever."

"Pinks don't grok."

"Erm, yeah, it's way sloppy, so here 'n there, broom witches have to sweep out after 'em, tidyn' up for the fussiest girlware, like y'all. One spinoff is, anything a pink spits out in tongues is gonna be fylgjc, has to be, but grokless, like that clannin banns thou gandered before tha gotst hended. I reckon someone lately asked an eager broom witch to tweak it up and she put a pink to spewin'. I mean, not many girls can spot it, most don't care. Funny thing though, there happen to be a dozen witches of *Eachdraidh* living in Grasp who *can*, in a heartbeat. So someone *wanted* thee to spot it, either to see if thou couldst, or more likely to stir thee into glarkin' they needed thy keenness for tongues 'n keep it to thyself like the meed teach banshee... as *if!* Thou'st been scammed by some very stern hags. I think it's thrilling!"

"...So, thou'rt saying this... codswallop, is like, stern?"

"No Gormglaith, I'm saying this *codswallop*... is like... for the *mop-pets*."

"Spare me."

"Ok," said Rhiamon, shrugging as she skipped back to her Celtic klompen and stepped into them. "I was only tryin' to find out if tha overheardst Gillead. Someone said thou mightst've done, breezin' into thy first thing. I mean Gillead's a fit wench but I reckon she's still got a thing or three to learn. I'll talk to her. Anyway, it's all MAG, life is meed, gadgets play the only feish in town, the scythe reaps and has done for over five thousand years."

"Ok. ...*Mag*?"

"Mungs As Gweeped. They have way heedful boards on all this tongue offset stuff at any witch house or teach. Hey Gormglaith?"

"What."

"Can we fling flax?"

"I'm trying to grok."

"Try flingin' flax! Here, looky..."

Rhiamon flopped to the floor, sitting upon the brightly edged and bighty heels of black klompen. She wriggled then threw shoulders back, palms up and open on thighs afar. Gormglaith did likewise, settling upon the heels of yellow Frisian klompen and the two witches lankily faced each other, flingin' flax.

Rhiamon's eyebrows went up.

"Thou'st been handfasting..." she said, glomming at Gormglaith's left palm.

"...with scollies I should hope."

Head lowered, Gormglaith quickly nodded.

"...Thy notion?"

She slowly shook her head, thatch swaying.

"Yeah, I was wondering how far they'd go. Seems it wasn't enough, getting thee hinged in that wanton setup for all to see. Nary two nights more blink by and we find thee handfasted with the latest, budding, bleeding crop of norns from Wrath ness. *Norns*, Gormglaith. Hast tha groked *that* one yet? There's no wriggling out now, thy doom's done. Forsake the quick plight and th'art the fickle, slippery tongue witch. Forsake this handfasting and th'art the fickle, slippery, norn ditching Celt slut, the cutter, dished in one of those short, weepy yarns for the heedless which always seem to wind up in the *Eachdraidh*. Thou'dst be shunned, thwarted by half the world for all thy puff and then some, far worse than what befell thy Geileis. Whoever brewed this up canny knew thee, Gormglaith."

Eyes still cast down, Gormglaith nodded sharply.

"Look, I know what thou'rt thinking," sighed Rhiamon.

"What! That any flock in the lane needs Snotra like carrying wheat to West meads? Without a wyrd freely sewn in the living minds and strings of girls, awakened and stirred the eald way, it ain't weird... and it ain't fylgjie!"

"Words shift and blow like the snow from meanings forsaken to the newly awakened."

"Tell me about it."

"Like I said, tongues have aught to do with it, low level's where the birr is. Slip spell into any toaster and zap, it's fylgjie! So leeg we can't put twains of Maiden lane in girls' brains. My life'd be *chill* I can tell thee."

Gormglaith stared at Rhiamon.

"Not," said the witch, sneering and shaking her head.

"That's not hello lizzy."

"Huh?"

"Thou saidst a pink can make like it's being helpful by feepin' hello lizzy over a daft notion but th'ast got it backwards. It's only hello lizzy if th'art fylgjie but get blown off anyway, like when broom witches shoo off norns with showers of lilies so y'all can say everyone's *fussy*, *boppin'* *girlware* then have a bash at spinnin' the wyrd for your own snot selves, not! I mean, since like, tongues have aught to do with anything. Now *that's* hello lizzy..."

"Hello, lizzy!" said Rhiamon, grinning wide, her taut black linen clad bottom bobbing on alder wood heels.

Gormglaith cast the witch a sidelong glance.

"Let's keep hands on our thighs, 'k?" Rhiamon carried on. "Runes and tokens are *so* to see but starlight's fit for thee and me."

"Oh, sorry."

"Anyway yeah, Maiden lane's toast but, all the affiae spells were buggy. Like it or not, any gadget thou canst think of is botched some way or another. We'll always be rubbin' sticks 'n stones and speech has been a thoroughly irksome bane ever since bairn began gabbin', never mind those first moof calls of open hex back in Newhaven. What a mess! As Erin said, there's only one truth but we'll never know, even if some stabs at it are way more helpful than others. Meanwhile the next weave could be rather deft and run even longer, twenty thousand years maybe. Tha canst tell thy sisters we're already hackin' it, by the bye. *Maiden lane for panes!* Catchy, huh?"

"*Too slim, kissin' kin.*"

"Have they told thee who she is yet?"

"Thou'rt a hag, Rhiamon Rush."

Rhiamon smirked.

"Girls find her thrilling. I mean, Graih's cunning, slick as tears, but there're lots of clever girls flitting about these moons."

"Meanwhile she's spun up a wicked lass cult..."

"Gurfling..."

"...and Gwerfyl says Maiden lane's gonna crash."

"...to a dodgy end. Which is why y'all still need me. She's got lasses from here to Fen Gloom the hard way believing Snotra's a yoke they need to throw off. If the new gweep's called *Too slim*, she'll wind up with a world under the woe of her own selfish fist. I grok thou'st heard, Graih's got a thing about betrayal. Me? I think she's only snared in a haunting notion some girl, somewhere, might be happier than her."

"Either way's wretched," said Gormglaith. "Wanna help Wyrd? Bring thine own needle and thread."

"Why do I know that's *Eachdraidh*...?" asked Rhiamon, smiling.

"Tangwen Toreth. Be free and let others be. Left on their own girls gather in the canniest flocks even when they don't seem to have done. Most are born wanting to get along with others and spend their lives tryin'. One by one they find the keenest and sundry braids, to care for themselves and weave through the wyrd with everyone else. Nobody can tell them how to do it, much less stop them because nobody, no girl, no pink, no hopper, can grok all the threads Wyrd looms, truth unknowable. Kiss Wyrd and thank her for the weird braids 'n knots she brings. Three norns lurk on those tangled roots under skeins of boughs growin' on a Yggdrasil tree to remind us Wyrd looms as she will, bygone to evermore with each of us freely stitchin' her own thread. That's what clanninin' was about to begin with and clannin by bleeding clannin, they spun their world fylgic."

"Yeah. Look, toasters've been scrozzling here and there for a dozen years, tripping all kinds and sundry, pesky snares and it's quickening. Hoppers are gonna start kickin' into upkeep spells, likely within about three dozen moons but there're lots of guesses, that's mine. Hey Gormglaith?"

"Hey *whatlaith*...?" she asked back, head tilted to the side.

Rhiamon's ghost leaned forward in a shimmer and kissed Gormglaith smack on the mouth, pog.

...

"Oy! ...Rhiamon!?"

"Keen, huh?"

"Ghost decks aren't meant to *do* that!"

"The rack's been hacked!"

"How sopping wicked! Oh... by the way, speakin' of wrinkly gweeps 'n norns 'n all, I'm meant to tell thee, a few wee swaps in the wheat freayll might be nudgin' things into upkeep a bit sooner than anyone glarked, stark, like, tonight."

"...Thou'st hooked up with a *ruthless* pack of yahs, Gormglaith."

"Gobsmacks that's keen! Yeah, I know... come *on* Rhiamon, let's try it again, 'k?!"

"Bloody flurt."

Gormglaith and Raohnailt were on the pink sand of a grassy knoll overlooking Neach beach by the Minch, down the steep cut from Sandwood's sunken, sundry hued flagstone crofts, Grasp's low greywacke and bluestone walls lost in foggy heathered gloom beyond. Warm in white longstockings, short cutty sarks and raw blond wooden klompen they sat on a blanket, its wide black and milky stripes strewn with frosty blue corundum water jugs and an unopened basket of woven ash splits. A chalken light gleamed through the clouds whilst before them a fast deepening Keayn sheear dwindled into sweeping mist.

This was a fit afternoon for the beach. A stiff, chilling breeze blew chin length hair as they gazed across the sea which slammed against boulders below dark looming cliffs stretching far on either side. A hundred yards to their right Blodwen and Njorthrbiartr walked and skipped faaishly towards Wrath ness with its hurried beacon, looking for flotsam beside crashing swells. Away to the left five scollagyn played with a luzz ball in front of Shenn Rhonwen's. Their screeches and squeals echoed off the soaring purple sandstone walls, wafting across loops of wailing wind and surf. Raohnailt snatched up a grey stone from the grassy sand.

"Hey look," she said, flipping it to show a rough, hewn end. "It's been split. See the ices."

Gormglaith leaned in. It was hard packed with small pink ones.

"Quartz?"

"Likely..." said Raohnailt, holding up the cracked shred.

"...Faerwin says, somewhere between ice and ash, life begins."

She eyed thundering surf and threw the pebble smack into a wave.

Gormglaith brooded at the stormy, trundling Minch. Reaching into a slit on the side of her cutty sark she pulled out the sheer gore and biting her lip, flung it in a wide, sparkling, tumbling yaw.

"I never could throw for fuck," she sighed with a shrug.

Raohnailt drew up her legs and grinned. Breakers thrashed as flaxen, red freaked hair flew in the steady gale of a western wind. Gormglaith cast her a feazed stare, hackled straw blond thatch streaming across bright blue lake eyes.

"So what's in the basket?"

"Guess."

The scythe reaped, slackening and wraithen.

glossary

Although *Gormglaith* has no made up words about two dozen are Gaelic. Another dozen or so are Celtic, Irish, Dutch or Norse (which carries its own hints of a girlish sway), with bits of slang and gweep-speak thrown in. These meanings can be gleaned from the tale and are here to help with glarks.

afliae From a Norse rune of *fate* and the early matriarchs.

air witch From Irish *airmed* and Norse *eir*, a *healer* who taught her craft and knowledge of herbs to her sisters (who are said to have been the only physicians in old Scandinavia).

ash If not meaning a tree or hue, then elemental carbon, or as wontedly, *organic macro-molecules*, those skeinish braids of carbon, hydrogen, oxygen, nitrogen and often sulfur which make up the carbohydrates, purines and pyrimidines with the phosphoric, amino and nucleic (RNA, DNA) acids from which life on earth is spun. Mab and Raognailt further call both amino and nucleic acids *ash gobblers*.

bane In the tale this word can carry a Manx Gaelic spin, such as *white*, *blank*, *fallow* or *unplowed*.

banshee Manx Gaelic *ben shee* is alike with this Gaelic/Irish word meaning *sister faerie*, rune of an ancient helper linked with earth and stone, also known to wail upon an impending death of kin. In the tale, any of the last four plights in a teach clannin, who together rune the wyrd's four twined pulls.

ben chee Manx for *wet nurse* (spoken 'bɛ:dn xi:).

besom Twig broom, rune of girls, cleaning, home, the moon and life itself. In the tale a bit of mote craft has been spun through the ash wood and heather to also make it a deeply shared feely gadget, helping girls fetch (which is to say, *go elsewhere in their minds*) together. Now and then called the *faerie's roan*.

bluesquash A big blue-grey squash which can roughly match the overall shape and size of a girl's head (or truth be told, her skull), more wontedly called the *blue hubbard squash* after Elizabeth Hubbard of Marblehead, Massachusetts (1842).

board Middle English for *table*. Maegden sit about a *bone board* at a witch house or in a teach (likely from *boning up at the board*).

Bryn larach Albannach Gaelic for *fetching ruin* (more or less).

bugs *Microbes*.

bunchberry Shared bike put out by shops and inns, bunchberries have the same pumpkin-red hue.

bundling *Karyotype* or arrangement of chromosomes.

butties Northern UK (Liverpool) slang for *sandwiches*.

cairmeal Gaelic word for *licorice*. See *slattag ghlass*.

clannin From *clannin'*, a shortening of *clanning* from Irish *clann*, Gaelic *clein* and English *clan*, also meaning *tribe*, *children*. Singular and plural are alike. See *plight*, *maegden*.

clarsach Highlands harp. Also the northern constellation *Lyra*.

coorsyn Manx Gaelic, monthly flow, catamenia. Most maedchen are wont to begin coorsyn from thirteen to sixteen. Geileis' talk of late onset with Gormglaith may hint at a stern rune for a maegden.

cutty sark Albannach Gaelic for *short shirt*. Pulling from the old Highlands yarn, one night some witches reel about a fire under the stars and moon. Among them is a rather fetching girl wearing a linen nightshirt which she long ago outgrew and now it's so starkly way short. In our tale this has come to mean a waist length or even higher cropped jacket with long sleeves, but for a forearm length only ever (and not often) worn with long, open fingered gloves. These are spun in many and sundry hues, cuts, weights and cloths, thrown on mostly to ward off chills or the sun. When falling to the hip bones a cutty sark's rather like an Argyll, if hemmed high at the ribs perhaps a kind of bolero. Either way it's more or less a rebecca, always single breasted, collared or not and so wontedly worn open.

Eachdraidh *Eachdraidh nan fylgjie*, Albannach Gaelic for *Tale of the fylgjie*.

faaish Manx Gaelic, a *sprite* or sprite-like.

faeries From many and sundry European myths with much Celtic spin, in the tale these are meed, fetching and very fylgjie teaching runes for moppets. They're also likened, in the English way, to the notions of *pixies*, *sprites* and Germanic *elves*, these latter words more wontedly spoken as shorthand for how some girls (like Raognailt, Blodwen, Mab

or Enid) might look or seem to others.

fallain Gaelic, *healthy*.

feep Gweepspeak for the sine wave first sounded by computers of the later 20th century (often by piezoelectric means). *I'm startled*.

feish Manx Gaelic, *festival* or big gathering, shortened from *feish chiaull*, a musical one. In the tale, a yodeling show.

Fen Glioon *Glioon* is Manx for *knee*. Same spot as something fleetingly called *Geneva*.

flurt Gaelic for *feast*. See also *ben chee*.

freayll, the Gaelic for keep (spoken freil), what grew from a take on canny free and self-bounding swaps, keeps and behaviour spun by the earliest clannin. A *freayller* (from *freayll arrey er*, linked with *chaperon* or *tend*) is someone who does this.

Frigg, loch A lake once known as both *Como* and *Laria*.

fuck Most likely came to Anglo-Saxon over a thousand years ago through Albannach Gaelic from Scandinavia. A token of this is when Njorthrbiartr (n'jov'b3:t) shouts it with hard Gaelic spin in sheaf eighteen. It runes the closest kinds of plightish braiding and steadfastness among girls and at the evermost, a handfasting into the wyrd. Tegan chides Gormglaith for widening its meaning, something mae-gden (and the dashing tongue witches among them) are wont to do.

furlong 220 yards, eight to a mile. Lengths are told the English way since this seems to fit more closely with how girls think of things (and is widely known among English speaking readers).

fylgja Norse myth, a watcher who shows up in dreams, linked to being caught in a stitch of life or death and the notion of twins.

Galad bane From Manx Gaelic, a name for *Mont Blanc*, the tall mountain south of Geneva, Switzerland.

gauge British, the wonted 14 gauge weave of longstockings is rather heavy at way over a 16th of an inch, whilst a ring bowed with 17 gauge wire is a bit under a 16th of an inch thick.

ghost Three dimensional cast of polarized light. Holograph.

gibecrake Middle English, *small bedeckings*, wontedly in the hair.

girl From Anglo-Saxon *gerle*, meaning *child*, later shifting to *juvenile or adolescent daughter*, sometimes widening to x^2 , where it's laid in the tale. Nigh her 272nd birthday Blaaid would say she's a

girl like Beiwe ('beiwi:) at five.

glain Welsh for *clean* or *pure*, related to *gel* and English *gleam*, an egg shaped (and sized) feely gadget.

glark Gweepspeak for *infer from context*.

glass Can carry a Manx Gaelic spin, *light green*.

goblin A *ghosted* (holographic), more or less freely flying control or small display cast of light. See *tangle*.

gore A three cornered swatch, a triangle. In the tale these are often upended (inverted) as runes for x^2 . Also a prism, a light beam splitter.

Gormglait *Gormglait Grendel Hafgan Halsen*, Celtic/Gaelic for *dark blue green loch, storm in summer veering*.

gweep From early hackerspeak, to hex.

gwaen Welsh, a flat *plain*.

gwli Welsh, lane behind a house, a small *alley*.

heathen Old English, she who lives upon the heath.

hex Numeric base16. The way to ten in hex is 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 a b c d e f 10. As a noun, the calls for toasters and pinks. As a verb, gweeping them. The Pennsylvania Dutch homonym is way twined.

hopper A bit cruncher (computer), after Grace Hopper (1906-1992).

hough Anglo-Saxon for a spur of land, wontedly in the bend of a river or stream.

ice Any crystal, *ash ice* being *carbon crystal* (*diamond*).

Keayn sheear Manx Gaelic, *Atlantic Ocean* (*sea of the endless west*).

Kin Dails *Dails* is Celtic for *meeting grounds*.

kindel Middle English for *offspring*, children, also linked with Middle English *kindelen*, to *spark*.

klompen Dutch for *wooden shoes*. In the tale these are the bighty (rounded) kind, often more so, sometimes bigger and a bit wider. The earliest klomp ever found was made almost 700 years ago and looks like some worn today.

kynn Manx Gaelic, *deep affection*, akin to *kynney*, kindred, for the plighted sisters who bring in and raise a clannin girl. Singular and plural are alike.

league 3 miles. Handy in tales but tell someone it's a league to your wonted carryout and they'll think you're daft (never mind it's too far).

leeg Dutch for *empty*, also UK slang for *not helpful*, empty headed.

lekker UK slang (spoken 'læk3) for *meed*, *fetching*, from Afrikaans and back to the same Dutch word with a much alikened meaning.

longstockings When she was twenty-three Hertha Thiele starred in the very first grrl flick, *Maedchen in Uniform* (1931, Berlin), set in a Prussian boarding school for girls and later banned but not before *Maedchen* made its sparkly splash across Europe to North America and Japan. In 1980 Thiele said,

I wore those long dark stockings in the film... so that in those days the kiss and the stockings already created a cult.



Hertha Thiele | *Maedchen in Uniform*, Berlin (1931)

Thiele told how in some places "where the film was very big" girls went to stores asking for the same kind of long stockings. Like those worn in the tale these two words are themselves woven together, handy and true.

luzz UK slang, to throw or toss. *Luzz ball* is a kind of *volley ball*.

maedchen German for *girl*, linked with Middle English *maegden* (see below). In the tale this means a girl in her pre, early or middle teens (between ten and seventeen).

maegden Anglo-Saxon *girl* or *maiden*. In *Eachdraidh*, an unplighted girl between seventeen and twenty-four. Groking her life's in a stitch and given fylgjc ways, she'll likely either plight a clannin

or pledge a teach.

moof Gweepspeak for a new hack, something edgy and untested.

moppet From Middle English *moppe* for a rag doll or small child. In the tale, a kindel between three and ten.

mote What protons, neutrons and electrons are made of.

natron This caked mixture of plant-ash mineral salts (mostly soda "ash" [*sodium carbonate*] and about .17 "baking" soda [*sodium bicarbonate*] along with a bit of household salt [*sodium chloride*] and *sodium sulfate*) has been harvested straight from dried lakes in Egypt for thousands of years. Mildly antiseptic and exfoliating, quick to break down fat and grease (never mind putting out their fires) and dry up water, this is a wonted soap and tooth scrub, also found in most any kitchen for both cooking and cleaning. The scientific symbol for sodium (NA) came from this word.

neach Gaelic, *individual*, for *unique*, like none other. Often means the first ever braiding of a tide (Geileis is neach, Gormglaith is twin).

Newhaven A town near Brighton, Sussex where the affiae first gwept.

norn From Scandinavian/Norse myth, one of three sisters who rune fate. May be tied to a Swedish word meaning *to inform secretly* along with the Indo-European root *ner* meaning *to twist* or *twine*. When spoken of in the tale, a kind of witch. See *wyrd*, also *fylgja*, *plight*.

ox Can also take an Anglo-Saxon (Old English) spin, through Old Frisian *oxa*, meaning any *cow* and furthermore in the tale, *beef*, which as Raognailt ('rægnɑ:lt) puts it, isn't gotten by slaughter.

pillywiggin Echo of Celtic myth, *spring flower faerie*.

pink Reckoning and outlook gadget. Early on, a keen kind of wire wrapped with pink sleeving had sometimes shown up in ranting gear, called *pink* hardware by some and the term stuck.

plight From Middle English *plighthen* by Anglo-Saxon *plihtan*, to endanger or put at risk, through *pliht* (danger, risk). Linked with Anglo-Norman *plit* (fold or wrinkle), Dutch *verplichten* (to impose an obligation) and Danish *forpligte* a pledge of honor or faith, which yielded the early clanninish meaning: To tangle with danger through gathered pledge (see *fylgja*, *maegden*).

pog Gaelic *kiss* (in the tale this hints at tongues).

popinjay Middle English, from Old English *popingay*, also *popyn gay*, at its earliest (and ever still) meaning the European or English green woodpecker, who chatters rather a lot. Later came to mean this bird's hue too, a bright woodsy green, as in the tale. By Elizabethan times this word seems to have been utterly muddled with the Old French-Spanish-Arabic for *parrot* (*papegai*, *papagayo*) which caused sundry puzzlement among English speakers, never mind those who thought it was some kind of jay. Also more lately cited in the UK (2005) as someone given to idle or empty prattle, among other meanings.

Rank, the Manx, what was once called *France*.

Running The Rhône river.

rusted water Hydrogen peroxide.

scaanish Gaelic, meaning *spooky*, ghostly, or *like a double*. Akin to *scaa*, for *someone way thin*, shadow, or *shade*. Linked with *wraith*.

scollagyn From Gaelic for *schoolgirls* and *scollag* for *scholar*, with *scollaghan*, for *nestling*. Spoken with a hard *g*, the singular and plural forms are alike. Scollagyn may call each other *scollies*. These are maegden pledged to a *teach*, most likely at seventeen or eighteen (like Gweneth), instead of plight. Raohnailt's maedchen pledge at sixteen seems to have been unwonted and she lets Gormglaith hear about it.

shawn trews From Albannach Gaelic *seann truibhas* meaning *old trousers*, as in kicking them off in a hurry.

shee Manx for *peace*, also for the *highland faerie*, *daoine sith*, rune of ancient, steadfast sisters linked to the earth and harvest. One "gets herself" shee by pledging a *teach* instead of going to witch house. Being shee is thought of as another kind of plight and has aught to do with being a witch, but lots of shees plight into a clannin sooner or later anyway (Flann did it sooner, Gogan much later) and many shees do split as witches. Unplighted, some flit about, others may hang out with a clannin for some time, by whatever stir. A shee's twin daughter is carried to birth by another shee (and not born a scollagyn), then mostly rained upon with care by the witches, shees and scollagyn about her, brought up and home schooled in the teach to later pledge or plight (or whatever she sees fit) like anyone else when she's maegden. Flann, Raohnailt and Feegan are "Blairie bairn" who happened to pledge Blairie as scollagyn too, which does seem wonted.

shenn Manx Gaelic *auld*, for *ancestor*.

skate Same craft as a *sled*, mostly, but bigger and kinder to the freayll since it skims on a narrow, laid groove.

skeel Manx Gaelic, *yarn, tidings, news*.

slan Irish, *health*, for *healthy*.

slash UK slang for *urinate*.

slattag ghlass Gaelic for *cucumber*. When the smell of newly harvested ones is mixed with that of cairmeal (licorice), girls may be swayed further into notions others are more fetching, even along with thoughts of making out with them.

sled Wontedly carries up to eight and is shared by a thorpe or town. Floated and pulled by a *sled lane* (which looks like any byway).

Sleepingland English meaning (and in the tale, name) of *Siberia*.

slushstone Concrete (mix of water, clinker, fly ash, gravel and sand which has dried and spun together into hard stone).

Snotra Norse myth, Frigg's helper, rune of knowledge and of a girl's self-sway or grip. In the tale this is what was once Bellagio at the split of lake Como in northern Italy.

Soohead Name of a maedchen haunt or hangout in Elmtorpe, taken from Manx *soo* for sip, soak up, suck, jam and wholesome food, also berry.

spells What the calculus came to be, kind of. Among other things, can also mean learned or set ways of doing stuff, such as recipes, or shreds of hex.

stern Behaviour deeply rooted in the early *Eachdraidh*. A clanniner or shee brought up this way, perhaps lastingly swayed by nightly readings from the *Eachdraidh*, is wontedly called a *henge maedchen* (often behind her back).

stoep Afrikaans English for an outdoor terrace, from the alike Dutch word for *sidewalk* or *riser*.

stone 14 pounds. 8 stone is a hundredweight (or 112 pounds), a bit more than middling weight for most.

string As wonted, also loosely for what motes are made of.

ta! UK slang, eager *thanks*.

tangle Can mean any kind of interactive interface, or running one.

teach Old Irish for *house*. Boarding school for scollagyn, who leave as shees after four years of boards like witch house but with a much

sterner fylgic bent. A teach is spun by eight plighted shees, whose clannin name is taken by anyone who pledges there. *Carrying over* is the shifting of one's pledge from one teach to another (as Feegan does from Blairie to Wrath ness).

thou, thee, tha From Old English, second person singular pronouns for subject and object, forms of *you* (the latter only spoken in the tale as second person plural, matching the early way). Mostly misunderstood after Elizabethan times and often wrongly written (never mind conjugated) in sundry fiction as a botchsome hack for olden "formal" speech when truth be told, *thou* had become, for two centuries at least (about 1450-1650), the more or less familiar second person pronoun. Earlier than this however, as in the tale, notions of familiarity have no sway.

They were last spoken in the mainstream only at the evermosts of either closeness or invective hurled between aristocrats. The writer glarks their drift from everyday speech had at least something to do with Elizabethan England's strong and fluid middle class, its roots in the Great Charter (*Magna Carta*) of 1215 and those which followed. Moreover in 1611, when they were already falling away, *thou* and *thee* showed up in the new *KJ* bible as a way to carry on the singular and plural second person pronouns found in the Greek and other early sources, although this was soon and wontedly very misunderstood by readers. Meanwhile by about 1600 the subjective *ye* (plural for *thou*) had also fallen out of speech as bearing too much on status (and is likewise unheard of in this tale). Either way, within a few decades most found it safer, more polite and altogether easier sticking to a one-fits-all *you* (the plural of *thee*).

Speaking of which (to hop down a bunny trail), *ye* is now wontedly muddled with the old spelling for the word *the* which began with the letter Þ (*thorn*, which stood for the sound *th*) and was written: þe. Sets of type made in Germany and brought to England for the early printing presses there lacked this character, so at first þe was sometimes spelled *ye* until folks settled on spelling it *the*. This mistaken *ye* is now almost always misspoken as *ji*: instead of as an everyday *the*, such as when it shows up in codswaloped 'Olde English' like: Ye Olde Candle Shoppe. In true Middle English this would have looked more like: Þe Old Candel Shoppe. Or, only for the fun of stretching things (altogether way too far) into Old English: Þe Eald Candelle Sceoppa. Though Gormglaith

might remind that back then, *sceoppa* meant *booth* or *house where a hoard is kept*, talk about TOSS.

Meanwhile the lack of a distinctive second person plural pronoun later gave rise to the use of such morphological analogies in the UK as *yousuns* and *youse* (there are others) and in some areas of North America *y'all*, the latter showing up in the tale only because the writer has been so delighted with it by her American friends.

Thou and *thee* are still spoken (but without the old grammar) by some in Cumbria, the East Midlands and other spots in Western England. In Yorkshire, *tha* is still heard as a personal pronoun. In the tale this is spoken as a kind of contraction in everyday speech, as with *tha knowst* being much the same thing as *ya know*. Lastly, here and there about the Atlantic northeast of America some Quakers were saying *thee* for both the subjective and objective until the 1950s. Clanniners took them all up again, with slursome ways rather close to the late Elizabethan, likely as a help in their skienish and talkative braidings among friends, kindel, kynn and kin.

thrall From Norse myth, for *farmer*.

thread Sometimes means *DNA*, which is braided in a double plait or helix.

tide From the *nucleotide* of deoxyribonucleic acid (DNA). A cast of DNA, which braids a living thing (also linked as a rune with the homonym for sea levels swayed mostly by the pulling moon).

toaster Gweepspeak, from the box for grilling bread, also from slang *toast*, for something wrecked. Any gadget (other than a pink), wontedly swayed by a hopper, which is often inside.

wanton Not stern but still fylgjie behaviour (more wonted in towns).

West meads, the The swath of trundling meadows and forests on the far western reaches of the Running alps (once called the Rhone Alps).

witch Someone split way keen at a fylgjie craft, which can happen at any age. A *witch house* is a kind of college, done after home schooling and wontedly lasting five years. Most girls go to these rather than a teach. Only witch houses split witches but this is not the pith of going to witch house.

Wrath ness Once called Cape Wrath, in the Highlands. *Ness* is an Old English-Norse word for *cape*.

wyrd Anglo-Saxon and Norse notion of *fate*, with an understanding that whilst bound by the past, each stitches her own thread into the wyrd through how she deals with what's happening now. Called *Wyrð* when spoken of (runed) as a kind of *fairie*. Nobody by any craft can know, much less grok, even a wee slice of all the threads sewn so only Wyrð has sway. Linked to *norns*, three sisters who weave a tapestry from the layers of what has been, each life being a braid on the loom. The first sister runes *that which has been*, the middle one *that which is* and the last (wontedly known to be rather whist) *that which is still becoming*. The four twined pulls which keep the wyrd taut are strong, weak, stir (*electro-magnetism*) and trimmid (Manx for *gravity*). See also *banshee*, *flygja*, *plight*, *freayll*.

yah Manx Gaelic for *girl*, *lass*. Also means *yeah*, *yes*.

Timekeeping in Gormglaithe's world

Time of night or day is told as nigh sunset, midnight, sunrise or noon and is spot on for longitude. Canny, weird time telling gadgets show the nightly ebbs and flows of dusk and dawn along with the pulling moon, which each have their sways on nightly life.

Nights of the week are reckoned sundown to sundown. Each night and day has an Anglo-Saxon name.

Anglo-Saxon	English
Monaneve	Sunday night
Monandaeg	Monday
Tiweseve	Monday night
Tiwesdaeg	Tuesday
Wodneseve	Tuesday night
Wodnesdaeg	Wednesday
Thunreseve	Wednesday night
Thunresdaeg	Thursday
Frigeve	Thursday night
Frigedaeg	Friday
Saeterreve	Friday night
Saeterdaeg	Saturday
Sunaneve	Saturday night
Sunandaeg	Sunday

The twelve months, which have to do with farming and the sun, are given in Anglo-Saxon too. *Geola* is an earlier form of *Yule*. The new year comes at sunset with Samhain, 1 Blotmonath, which is also the beginning of winter. Mind, girls wontedly talk of their own time in moons, which are a bit shorter than months.

Anglo-Saxon	English
Blotmonath	November
Aerra geola	December
Aefterra geola	January
Solmonath	February
Hrethmonath	March
Eostremonath	April
Thrimilci	May
Aerra litha	June
Aefterra litha	July
Weodmonath	August
Halegmonath	September
Winterfyllith	October

There are eight flurts. Four are quarter nights, peaked or middled tilts of the earth towards the sun (a cormid is an equinox) whilst the other four bring in the fylgic seasons, alike to the Celtic. Samhain (winter flurt of the affiae and last harvest) begins the new year and links to Halloween. Yule lasts twelve nights. Imbolc (spring flurt of new milk) has its wee echo in Valentine's Day. Beltane (summer flurt of life) and May Day are much alike. Lughnasadh (fall flurt of kin) is like an end-of-summer break.

Flurt	When	For
Samhain	1 Blotmonath	Winter
Yule	21 Aerra geola	Solstice
Imbolc	1 Solmonath	Spring
Ostara	21 Hrethmonath	Cormid
Beltane	1 Thrimilci	Summer
Midsummer's eve	21 Aerra litha	Solstice
Lughnasadh	1 Weodmonath	Fall
Harvest home	21 Halegmonath	Cormid









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